

# BARA PARANG

The tale of the developmental refugees of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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## **WHY THIS BOOK**

The uneasy situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region of Bangladesh, though not comprehensively reported by the media, is a matter of concern for any citizen of the country.

The problem is decades old and with the passage of time it has turned from bad to worse. The ethnic minorities of the Hill Tracts have failed to have their voices heard, while the majority of the population have reacted with the psyche of big-nation chauvinism.

The feeling of being left out was created among the minorities of the CHT region back in the sixties when the Pakistan Government decided to construct the Kaptai Hydro-electric dam on the Karnaphuli river. The dam is one of hundreds of development projects across the globe where people have been victimised without any proper compensation.

The dam on the Karnaphuli was constructed basically to generate electricity and release people from darkness. Even after three decades, it remains the major source of power for the country, but nobody cared to fully consider its adverse impact. There were also other benefits including: irrigation and drainage, flood control, enhancement of navigability of the rivers and the boosting of forestry resources. The plant was intended to produce 120,000 KW of electricity.

About 666 metres long and about 43 metres high, the dam was completed in six years. It resulted in a colossal artificial lake over an area of about 655 sq. km. It swallowed 125 moujas including the major portion of Rangamati town. The former residents of the area claim they watched helplessly as their land and houses were engulfed by surging water.

Estimates differ about the number of people and acres of arable land affected. Officials predicted about 80,000 would be affected but the figures had been put at 100,000 by others. The government intended to replace as much farmland as was lost, but records show it did not. Moreover, there was no consideration of proper compensation for the homes and other belongings. All compensation payments were in cash. Some of



the affected people argue that the misperception that the hill tribes are "migratory" and engaged in Jhum cultivation, contributed to a distorted view of the problem.

Allegations have also been made in different studies that many government officials were involved in the misappropriation of funds. A Chittagong University study shows 69 per cent of the Chakmas felt that the dam created food and financial problems for them, 69 per cent complained of inadequate government help for rehabilitation, 58 per cent were disheartened because it did not provide any meaningful job opportunities and 93 per cent felt that their economic condition had been better before the construction of the dam.

The affected people had no role in the planning process nor were they consulted about the relocation or rehabilitation programme. They only had one choice and that was to leave the areas to be submerged. The people had completed an option form without any knowledge as most of them were unlettered. For many, the advice of a traditional leader like the Headman or a Karbari was considered important and in some cases these leaders took opposing positions. Very few were lucky enough to get advice from government officials. But the concept of any group decisions was absent and the government can be absolved of some responsibility as rehabilitation concepts of today were not available then.

During the process of rehabilitation, the Chakmas had an edge over the other minorities like the Maghs and Tangchangyas. Only Chakmas were allowed to resettle in the Kasalong tract while the needs of smaller groups were ignored.

The resident Bengalis also did not receive a favourable treatment even though they had lived in the area for years. Most of them were brought in to teach the Chakmas the art of plain land ploughing.

The circumstances leading to the displacement demonstrate that there were not only interactions between individuals, but were between different cultures regarding occupation and use of a space and environment. This suggests any relationship between man and the land must be given special consideration.



Water projects have created lots of problem throughout the world. The projects which were initiated in Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) in the sixties and were financed by the United States, have gone against the interests of the people. Over the past years, some people have taken initiatives against these projects and some have hit even the headlines of the newspapers. But not enough corrective measures have been taken.

However, if we compare the impact of the under-construction Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge with that of the Kaptai Hydro-electric dam, the results look ridiculous. Both projects are well intentioned, but the process of implementation is different. Almost the same number of people have been uprooted from their homes because of the Jamuna project, but a better rehabilitation plan has been worked out. Nevertheless, the compensation package has not been totally endorsed by the environmentalists.

In the case of the Kaptai dam, people were uprooted from their ancestral homes, their professions changed, living became difficult and the future was uncertain.

Bangladesh is not the only country where people have voiced concern about water projects. In neighbouring India, people waged war against the Narmada Valley project and in Nepal people have united to halt the implementation of the Arun-III project.

The conflict between development and people is age old. Since the beginning of civilisation, the powerful in the society have implemented development projects to benefit a few at the cost of the silent millions.

People need development and in the process of ensuring this development they have to pay a price. But the question remains: To what extent?

It seems confrontation between development planners and people will continue for years to come so long as government remains the source of power and the concept of national economy remains the driving force behind development.



In the public policy debate of today the economy is no longer considered a giant machine and people's perception, participation and their choice are considered important for the successes of an economy. But unfortunately, development planning in Bangladesh is yet to take a course where people can decide what they want.

This book, a study of the impact of a development project on the life of people, is based on the memory-recall of the affected people. They include people from different groups in different localities. They are Omar Ali and Abul Kashem of Puranbasti, Shilabrata Tangchangya, Meraji Karbari, Sanatan Tangchangya of Koyapara, Milan Tripura and Nripati Tripura, Seema Tripura of Rajmoni Para, Shankamala Chakma, Padarani Chakma of Keretkaba, Pottepudi Chakma, Punya Sen Karbari, Mukunda Lal Chakma of Baghaichari, Amar Jyoti Chakma, Baradananda Chakma of Mogban, Modhumangal Karbari of Mijirbal, Ananga Mohan Chakma, Shibu Rani Chakma of Boradam, Gunamani Mahajan of Balaghat, Nakyabi Chakma of Debashish Nagar, Gyan Bikash Tangchangya, Chitra Rekha Tangchangya of Rajasthali, Muktalata Chakma of Ugalchari, Kalpana Tripura of Balukhali, Charu Bikash Chakma, Gyanendu Bikash Chakma and Goutam Dewan of Rangamati, former Member of Parliament Dipankar Talukder and Chakma Raja Debashish Roy. There are some discrepancies in their statements, especially about the amount of money they received as compensation. But the story of sufferings remains the same.

As a necessary element, a chapter has been added to the book to give an idea about the present situation in the CHT region. To the young people of the area the events leading to the construction of the Kaptai dam are not agonising, but they are motivated by the elders. Because of a lack of an objective understanding about the situation on the part of the Bengalis, the situation in the CHT region has become critical and a permanent enmity has been created. But the seed of dissension and animosity was sown the day Kaptai dam was commissioned. The allegation of lack of objectivity also applies to individuals and organisations-nationally and internationally-those who are discussing the problems in the CHT today.



This book takes the name Bara Parang-an expression in Chakma language meaning "great exodus." The message of the word has been passed down through generations. The senior members of the Chakma and other minority groups know what Parang means to them. Their hearts still bleed and the damage remains beyond repair.

The book, part of the environmental impact study project of the CFSD, was designed to expose the damages that can be created in the process of implementing a development project. It evaluates the sufferings of the people living in close proximity to the project and also questions whether the government has the right to play with the fate and lives of its people. It questions what amount of compensation is enough to rehabilitate an individual into a completely new way of life.

Professor Anwarullah Chowdhury of the Dhaka University, Professor Ainun Nishat of the University of Engineering and Technology were available to supervise the study, funded by The Ford Foundation. Mr. Harikishore Chakma, Mr. Tapash Dewan and Ms. Preyasi Dewan spent difficult times in the field to prepare the text while my colleagues at the CFSD, Mr. Nayan Bhowmick and Ms. Quazi Nasima worked as research associates while Mr. Abdullah Noman of The Morning Sun and Ms. Liz Wane of The Independent took trouble to brush up the language.

Thanks are due to all of them without whose assistance and co-operation it would not have been possible to complete this work.

Dhaka, October, 1995

Mahfuz Ullah



**CHITTAGONG  
HILL TRACTS**

INDIA

KHAGRACHARI

INDIA

RANGAMATI

Rangamati

Lake  
Kaptai

Chittagong

Bandarban

50 miles  
80 kilometres

BAY OF  
BENGAL

BANDARABAN

Cox's Bazar

MAYANMAR





## **THE DAWN OF THE DARK ERA**

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region<sup>1</sup> of Bangladesh contains an extended 13,000 sq.km of land strip, basically hilly, forested sub-tropical area wrapping about nine per cent of the total area of the country.

The region comprises 11 hill ranges, of which four lie in the northern and seven in the southern areas. The hills range in height from a few hundred to about fifteen hundred metres. With a circuitry of rivulets and streams, fed by heavy monsoon and washed by frequent floods, the whole territory is a crowded green mass of wild growth containing a variety of plants, creepers and trees which accounts for about 52 per cent of the total forest area of the country.

The region was taken over by the East India Company, the front runner of the British colonist, during the decade between 1770 and 1780. Before that time, it was divided into two territories-- north and south-- and ruled by two native dynastic chieftain families. The north was under the jurisdiction of the Chakma Raja (King), while the south was under the Bomang Raja.

Owing to its abundance of cotton, the region earned the epithet 'Cotton Block' from its colonial masters. The Rajas paid taxes in that commodity to the East India Company.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the East India Company only collected taxes from the region, and avoided any administrative role. The Rajas were left somewhat independent with their authority to rule their fiefdoms. But this situation soon changed.

After the First Indian War of Independence in 1857, the British government took over the control of the East Indian Colonies, including the CHT region, from the East India Company. The Rajas were then placed under and made accountable to the Chittagong district administration.

Until 1860, the 'Cotton Bloc' was a unit of the Revenue Department under the Chittagong Collectorate and an administrative unit of the Chittagong district. In 1860, Act



No.22 was passed to give the Cotton Block the status of a full administrative district under the nomenclature of Chittagong Hill Tracts District.

After seven years, the government administrator of the region, who was called Superintendent, was redesignated as Deputy Commissioner. The headquarters of the district was shifted from Chandraghona to Rangamati in 1868.

The status of the area as a district was reverted to a subdivision after the British colonist took over the control of the Lusai mountains (present Mizoram State of India) and appointed an Assistant Commissioner to run the administration.

In 1900, the act of 1860 was amended and named the Chittagong Hill Tracts Rule Act-1900 (Act 1, 1900). The new law which came into force on 1 May the same year was later commonly referred to as the Hill Tracts Manual.

The Manual outlined a comprehensive legal framework for the administration of the region and provided for an autonomous governing system run by the Rajas.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts District was divided into three circles and they were placed under three chieftains: Chakma, Bomang and Mong Raja, as per a provision of the Manual. They were entrusted with the administration of, and collecting revenues in their respective circles.

Each circle was in turn divided into Taluks, and each Taluk into Moujas. The Rajas appointed the Dewans and Headmen in consultation with the district administration. The Dewans and Headmen were employed to run the administration and collect revenues.

Apart from their administrative and tax collecting powers, the Headmen had the judicial authority of a Junior Magistrate, which they exercised in settling disputes, punishing offenders and maintaining law and order in their respective Moujas. The Headmen were accountable to the Raja.



The Manual restricted leasing out any land of the area to any outsider and the Deputy Commissioner had the sole authority to regulate such leases. The region had never any court to settle matters of civil nature and the Deputy Commissioner was empowered to dispose of these litigation. The Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong acted as the Appellate Court for judgements made by the Deputy Commissioner.

The Manual was amended in 1920 and the administrator of the district was renamed Deputy Commissioner. However, under the prevalent dual administrative system, the British Governor of Bengal was given the sole authority to rule this 'Excluded Area' with advise from the Executive Council. The region enjoyed the status of an Excluded Area even after the enactment of the India Act, 1935.

The situation did not change immediately after the British left. The 1956 Constitution of Pakistan maintained that the area would be administered under the provisions of the Manual.

The status of the area was changed to that of a Tribal Area after the imposition of the amended Constitution by the military rulers of Pakistan in 1962 and the Manual was abrogated. But the application of these Clauses of the Constitution were kept in abeyance following appeals made by tribal chiefs.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Manual was not revised but its provisions were applied through executive orders.

## **THE ONSLAUGHT BEGINS**

The collective life and culture of the region's population was first threatened when the British rulers annulled the 52nd clause of the Manual in 1930. The clause was repealed in a bid to boost the Hill District's population and the Bengalis started migrating into the region.

Before 1900, the population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts District consisted of 13 minority nationalities speaking 10 different languages with the exception of a few non-local traders and a handful of Bengali families.<sup>2</sup> The Bengali



families were brought into the region by the Chakma Raja to train the hill people to methods of tilling the plain land across uncultivated areas of the region.<sup>3</sup>

The 52nd clause of the Manual was formulated to check any possible migration and settlement of outside population into the region. This clause empowered the district administration to expel any outsider from the region if the presence was deemed to threaten the peace or the administration of the region.

The second jolt came in 1937 when the Rajas were stripped of all their administrative, revenue collecting and judicial powers which were taken over by the district administration. The Rajas were later appointed advisors to the district administration.

The people of the region did not accept the way India was partitioned in 1947 according to the awards of the Radcliffe Commission. They wanted the CHT region to be allowed to join Mizoram or Tripura State under India.

To express disapproval of the partition, they hoisted the Indian flag in Rangamati on the partition day, 14 August 1947. A section of the local leadership claim the hoisting of the Indian flag made them hostile elements in the eyes of the government and during the 24 years of Pakistani rule they did not receive favourable treatment as citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The people were again disadvantaged in 1956 when the Dhaka High Court nullified the 51st clause of the Manual which could be applied to expel non-locals from the region. The clause was scrapped on the plea that it restricted free movement of the citizens, a right guaranteed by the Constitution of Pakistan.

The first of arguably the two most serious blows to the life, culture and economy of the population of the region was the construction of the Kaptai Hydro-electric Dam in Rangamati in 1960. This dam uprooted as many as 100,000 people from their ancestral homes. They were forced to seek new lives in unfamiliar and unhospitable circumstances, agonised by the



pain of separation from the members of their clan. About 40,000 of them crossed over to India to live as refugees.<sup>5</sup>

The second threat came in independent Bangladesh, when their status as minorities was denied in the new Constitution.

## **THE DAM GOES UP**

The Karnaphuli river originates from the Lusai mountain range in the Mizoram State of India. Following a south-westerly course through the Hill Tracts it flows for more than 160 km to fall into the Bay of Bengal.

The name Karnaphuli carries a legend. It says, once upon a time an Arakanese princess fell in love with a tribal prince of Chittagong. While appreciating the reflection of the moon dancing on the water surface on a moonlit night, the princess inclined slightly and a flower tucked in her hair by the prince fell into the river. The princess immediately jumped into the river to save the flower but could not. Rather she was carried away by the current and vanished into the river. The prince jumped into the river to rescue the princess, but in vain. Out of sorrow he drowned himself in the river to unite with the princess in the world after death.

The tragedy gave the river its name Karnaphuli from the word Karnaphul meaning flower of the ear.

The legend has also been reflected in the following words of national poet of Bangladesh, Kazi Nazrul Islam:

*Oh Karnaphuli,  
Perhaps some day the ear-ring of a young lady fell into your water  
When she was rowing against your stream  
In a Sampan in search of her lover  
Unknowingly her hair-bred got loose  
Her ear-ring slipped into your water  
Wearing lovingly that ear-ring  
Did you then become Karnaphuli?*

The idea of a dam on the Karnaphuli was floated as early as the beginning of the 20th century. The British rulers toyed with the idea of damming the Karnaphuli for two main reasons: first, to check the recurring floods downstream of the



river and; second, to utilise its water resources for power generation and other purposes.

The feasibility of such a dam was first studied in 1906. An expert named Mr. Greaven examined the course, depth, flow and various other aspects of the river in 1923. But no concrete proposal was prepared until 1946 when the then Superintending Engineer for the region, Mr. E.A. Moore, submitted a report on the Karnaphuli Project, recommending a dam site at Barkal, a place 60 km upstream of Kaptai.

In 1950, Merz Rendal Vatten, Consulting Engineers, proposed a site for construction of the dam at Chilak Dhak in Barkal thana, about 40 km upstream of Kaptai. In 1951, engineers of the Pakistan government proposed the site at Chitmoram, about 12 km downstream of Kaptai.

The site at Chilak Dhak point was abandoned for several reasons. The most important was the lack of any clear projection on the nature and extent of the possible uses of the water that would be available on the dam.

According to the original project proposal, the dam could be built at any one of the three convenient points downriver from the East Pakistan border. But the problem with a dam at any of these three places was that once it was built it would not be possible to construct any more dams further down the river. The reason was that even a small dam further down the river would cause the original dam to overflow.

Finally in 1951, under the supervision of Khawja Azimuddin, Chief Engineer, Irrigation, the dam site was selected at Kaptai, about 45 km south east of Rangamati town. Preliminary work began in 1951 and physical work during 1952 by the government engineers. The United States agreed to provide fund for the project and International Engineering Company (IECO) was first engaged for the study of the project in 1952. Again in 1954, the same company was engaged for engineering service while Utah International Inc. was hired as the construction worker. The work started in October 1957.

Construction and erection work were carried out for about four and a half years and Unit No.2 started power generation



in January 1962, while Unit No.1 came into operation in February 1962.

About 666 metres long and about 43 metres high hydro-electric dam was completed in six years and it was inaugurated on March 30, 1962, by President of Pakistan Ayub Khan. The dam resulted in a colossal artificial lake and an area of about 655 sq. km, comprising 125 Moujas including the major portion of the Rangamati town, went under water.

### **THE PROPOSED BENEFITS**

The proposal on the construction of the Kaptai Hydro-electric Dam envisaged five types of benefits from the project. These were: 1. Power generation; 2. Irrigation and drainage; 3. Flood control; 4. Enhancement of navigability of the rivers; and 5. Boosting forestry resources. Later, fish culture in the lake was added to the list of benefits.

According to the project proposal, the total potential power generation from the dam was estimated at 120,000 kw. The power generation centre would have four units, each unit having a capacity of 30,000 kw. If all the 120,000 kw power from the four units was consumed then an additional 30,000 kw unit would be built, which would be fuelled by coal and diesel. Ultimately, it was calculated, a total of 655 million kw hours of electricity would come from hydro-power while 75 million kw hours from coal and diesel.

In order to provide irrigation for farming and maintain drainage of excess water from the land, a provision was made to install 2,500 power-driven pump machines in the project area, each pump being 24 HP having a capacity of 18 kw and covering, on average, an area of six square kilometres. The project proposal also estimated that these pumps together would be able to drain out a total area of 5,000 sq. km under four feet of water. In the dry season, they would be used to irrigate farm land with water from rivers and other water bodies. It was also calculated that a second crop could be grown on a total of one million acres by running these pumps eight hours a day.



It was also projected that a total of 465 sq.km area in the region could be protected from annual flooding after the dam was in place. This region, upstream of the Chittagong proper, suffered heavy damages from three major floods between 1920 to 1950. The reservoir of the dam, later to be known as the Kaptai lake, would be able to contain the water from such floods that would cause an additional flow of more than 150,000 cusec of water. The dam would prevent a greater flow of water into the downstream areas and thus protect the habitat from recurring floods.

The navigability throughout the segment of the Karnaphuli from the dam point to the Bay of Bengal would also improve as an optimum flow of water from the lake would be maintained by turbines. As a positive result of the dam, it was predicted the water level at Chittagong Port point would rise by about one metre while the water level in the river under the project area, upstream from the dam point, would go up by about two metres. This high level of river water would ensure easy movement of the vessels through the river.

Until the commissioning of the dam, a large part of the forests across the region was almost inaccessible. Wood, timber and other forest resources could only be carried via the Karnaphuli. There was little movement of people through the jungle as there were no roads. Only during the monsoon were forestry resources collected from along the various tributaries of the Karnaphuli.

But if there were heavy rains, the tributaries overflowed and there were strong currents making collection impossible. As a result of the dam, a 633 km long regular river route became available, which facilitated collection of forestry resources.

The original proposal did not include any provision for fish resources development in the Kaptai lake. About five years after the lake took shape, attention was drawn to the potential of fish cultivation in the lake. The Bangladesh Fisheries Development Corporation now releases fish fry in the lake every year. There has also been a large natural fish population in the lake since its inception.



## **THE IMMEDIATE FALLOUT**

The emergence of the 655 sq. km lake was an unforeseen nightmare for the local people. It swallowed 54,000 acres or about 40 per cent of the total cultivable land in the whole region. The original Rangamati town went into the lake. It swallowed the homes of 125 Moujas rendering about 100,000 people, belonging to 18,000 families, homeless. They were about 25 per cent of the total population of the region.

Following the construction of the Kaptai dam there was an acute shortage of cultivable land in the region. The East Pakistan Agriculture Department commissioned a land use survey in the Chittagong Hill Tracts District in 1969. According to the survey, only 3.2 per cent of the district's total land was capable of producing all kinds of agricultural crops, 29 per cent suitable for mostly Jhum cultivation, and normal farming and kitchen gardening, 15.5 per cent either fruit plantation or forestry and 77 per cent for forestry only.

As part of the original rehabilitation plan, the government allotted land to the displaced families in the low-lying areas of Langdu, Barkal and Baghaichari thanas for resettlement. But those areas gradually went under the expanding lake water rendering the rehabilitated people homeless for a second time in a year.

The Kaptai lake took about two years (1960-61) to take its final shape. In the second year when the low-lying areas of Langdu, Barkal and Baghaichari thanas began to be submerged the newly-settled people of these areas started leaving for India.

The government tried to resist this exodus and carefully monitored their movements. In a bid to outwit the government, the affected people resorted to various tactics. Some of them left their houses at night keeping the lanterns burning so it was assumed the residents were still in their houses.

These people first migrated to the Mizoram, Tripura and Assam States of India. Later, they were transferred to Arunachal Pradesh.



The Kaptai dam, forced tens of thousands of people to split with their kith and kin and accept a life in exile. So, even today, when someone utters the word 'Bara Parang', (meaning great exodus) the local people, particularly the Chakmas, are lost into their past, the past which has resulted in an agonising present for them.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE NIGHTMARE DESCENDS**

During the construction of the dam, senior government officials held a number of meetings with the Chakma Raja and the Headmen of the area on various aspects of the project. Although it was told that there would be flooding and an area would go under water permanently, it was not ascertained exactly how much land would be affected or how high the water level would be.<sup>7</sup>

Without preparing the people for a proper evacuation, one fine morning it was announced through loud-speakers and relayed through the respective Headmen that within a few days the dam would be inaugurated, the project area would go under water and, therefore, the villagers would have to evacuate.

Under an ill-conceived, ill-prepared plan, the project authorities offered the affected people land in various places outside the project area. People were asked to make their requests for land by filling out a form which was completely a strange phenomenon for those un-lettered people.

But they had to decide very fast as little time was left, and frantic discussions ensued. They rushed to their Headmen or Karbaris for advice on what places to choose as new homes, and to ascertain how they would be able to settle there. But it seems the Headmen and the Karbaris themselves were not clear about these things and provided little help.

Amid this confusion, before people could prepare for an evacuation, the dam was commissioned and the deluge struck. They were familiar with inundations of flooding during the monsoon when the Karnaphuli swelled and flooded the adjacent areas, but those inundations lasted for a day or so. This time the people saw, to their puzzlement, that instead of



going down, the water went up and up and devoured more and more areas. In the process, thousands of homesteads, huge property and vast tracts of crop fields went under the water.

The people, then began a struggle to save their belongings, cattle, poultry and foodgrains from the flooding. In the confusion, many lost touch with their families failing to keep track of who was going where. And in the course of just a couple of days, about 100,000 people became helpless refugees in their own homeland.

Charu Bikash Chakma, (65), a local political leader, claimed the original plan was abandoned because Indian territory would be submerged.

Terming the project a political dam, he said the government plan was to destroy the heartland of Chakma population.

He said the project could very well be set up at Sangu and only few hundred people would have been affected. But nothing happened. The government had plans for rehabilitation but in reality it did not work. No government had cheated its people to that extent, he said.

He said: "Compared to the Tarbela dam in West Pakistan, the project here was part of a political persecution. We were told that we would be given land for land, vocational training to adapt to new situations and bank loans but we failed to realise that nothing would work in the process of painful eviction.

"It took 15 days for water to come. Nobody had any idea about the level of water. In the process of shifting and rehabilitation the cash we received was spent."

Charu Bikash Chakma said government claimed that about one hundred thousand people were affected but "my estimate is 150 thousand."

He said in 1964 about 40 thousand Chakmas crossed into India. The Indian government named the rehabilitation



process Operation Karuna (mercy). The Mizos refused to accept the Chakmas, so they were shifted to NEFA, he said.

He said: "Poeples were asked to evacuate but there was no rehabilitation plan for them. None knew how far the lake would spread, how high the water level would go. So, when the flooding began to engulf the area, people took to nearby or the immediate higher grounds, when those areas were also devoured by the expanding lake they had to leave their ancestral land."

He said many diseases broke out among the people as they were forced to live in unhygienic conditions and drink from the river polluted by human and animal excrement.

The elderly political figure argued: "Wasn't it a predictable situation for the government? They were the experts! But they choose not to take even emergency medical precautions for the displaced people, let alone a comprehensive rehabilitation programme."

"If there were proper medical backups many lives could be saved. On all counts, you must admit, it was a great conspiracy of the Pakistan government against us."

Gyan Bikash Chakma, currently living in a village of Rajasthali thana, was brought up in Reingkhong village of Bilaichari thana after the dam had rendered his family homeless.

"It's all right that human beings see their own good first. But became simply selfish then," a distressed Gyan Bikash said. "Few bothered about others at that time. Everyone was concerned about his own survival, trying to save own belongings."

"We, who were nearer the dam site, were hit first. Our house was about 15 km upstream from the dam point. The flood water engulfed our land and homesteads before we could realise exactly what was happening. It was chaos. As the flood water surged, people - men and women - rushed to the top of the nearby hills with whatever belongings they could carry on their heads."



They began to clear the jungles to create shelters. People laboured like hell, day and night. Many even lived under trees. But soon it became clear to them that all the land and habitations had permanently gone under the water."

"We were rendered totally helpless," said Omar Ali, (70), of Puranbasti village in Betbunia under Kawkhali thana.

"It is not possible now for others even to imagine the situation. You tell me, who wants to abandon their land, homes, cattle and property? But we were undone. Had it been a band of men trying to evict us from our homes we would have fought them back. But you can't beat back a surging deluge!

"It's such a painful experience for one to see one's own house, the house where one's forefathers lived, to be devoured in a flood which would never recede. Many people cried in frustration, in helplessness. They did not want to leave. Many of them even raised high platforms in their houses to live there in a futile hope that the water might go down. But it did not take a long time for them to realise the finality of the irreversible event.

"You know, the lake took a bigger shape as the tears of those helpless people were added to it!"

Abul Kashem, (65), of the same village said: "The then Chakma Raja had brought our forefathers into this region to teach the hill people how to till the plain land. The tribals did not cultivate the plain land of their region then. Since then we had been living in that village. We were forced out of our homes for three generations by the dam"?

He said although it was announced through loud-speakers for people to evacuate, almost none of them left before their land and homes were engulfed.

Abul Kashem lived at 16 No. Mouja near the mansion of the Chakma Raja in Rangamati town. The low-lying areas of Mogban, Baradam, Jeebtali and Bangara were further down river and were flooded first. People of these areas, therefore, were the first to seek new shelters. They moved out by boats.





*The original palace of the Chakma Raja, which went under water.*



The water swelled further and inundated the high land. So, Kashem and his family were eventually compelled to set out in search of new places to settle with whatever they could take away with them.

Kashem said they were completely taken aback by the transformation of such a vast area into a sea-like water body in such a short span of time.

Gautam Dewan, a former chairman of the Rangamati Local Government Council, said people had no idea about the level of water. "We were not prepared for the impact. There no people to extend a helping hand, and not enough boats to carry our belongings," he said.

He said the government prepared some land at Kasalong by dereserving forest for settlement.

Most of the attention given to the relocation by the government was focused on Kasalong. How did the Chakmas feel about settling in Kasalong?

Most of the settled valley villagers were unfamiliar with the habitat of a dense monsoon forest. Before resettlement began, the larger part of the valley floor had been quickly combed for individual of commercial value.

Gautam's father, who owned 300 acres, refused to go and "our house went under water," he said.

He said the lake had contributed to their poverty. "When the project was commissioned the government did not extend enough support. The compensation of liquid cash was spent on unproductive things. We were encouraged to go for horticulture without any arrangement for marketing."

Shilabrata Tangchangya, (50), is presently a settler of Koyapara village, a hilly habitation in Bandarban district. He was just a young boy of 15 or 16 when the dam was constructed. They lived in Dighalchari village, about 6.5 km away from the main dam site.



He remembers the time vividly: "We often went to the dam site to watch the construction work. The massive activities were quite fascinating to observe. There I first saw how machines like tractors and bulldozers so easily razed, piled and levelled massive chunks of earth. They first razed the hills, then sheds, barracks and a bazar was built there. Many of us speculated that all these were being set up as a cantonment for soldiers. At the initial stage, we were even happy at that development because it took little time to sell whatever we took to the market and the prices were quite attractive too."

Shilabrata Tangchangya is not a happy man now. Thirtyfive years of struggle to survive has left its mark. He is now a frail, sad figure. He said: "I still hear the booming sounds of the dam gate closing that continued throughout the whole night. By the morning, the water had reached our door-steps. The whole area had turned into a sea. We set free our cows and goats, hens and ducks and then began the rush with the affected people to take their rice, paddy, furniture and whatever else possible to the nearby hills. Then, many people started clearing the jungles on the hills to build shelters. Though every possible belonging was taken to the hill top, many still went to their houses to spend the night. But many of them had to rush out of their houses at dead of night when the swelling water touched them while they slept.

"We just helplessly watched our beloved homes going under the water. This dam has turned us into paupers."

"What a nice place we lived in!" he remembered. "But here, in this Koyapara, there is no plain land, it is just hills and hills all around."

When asked about the dam and its aftermath, Milan Tripura and Nripati Ranjan Tripura of Rajmoni Para village sighed audibly and Nripati said "What's the use now talking about the dam. It took from us all that we had."

Pausing for a while, he resumed: "We lived in Kellamura village. It was not very far from the Rangamati town. Our village was situated on a relatively higher land compared to many other villages of the locality. But the water did not spare us. Our village was also devoured. We first took shelter on an



adjacent hill. The hill was not affected by the inundation in the first year. The water came up to the base of the hill and stopped. During that time it looked like an island.

"But gradually, in the following months, the sides of the hill began to erode as the waves hit them. It completely went under water in the second year. We had no choice but to move and come to this place.'

Milon Tripura added: "We sometimes thought we were condemned by Heaven, maybe, for some sins. Otherwise why should we have lost our homes twice just in the span of only one year? Oh, we were about to go insane as there was no work, no money during those awful days."

Pottepudi Chakma, (64), wife of Mukunda Lal Chakma, (60), of Baghaichari, said after the dam had been completed, her husband and his brothers, along with other co-villagers, trekked a vast area in search of a place for resettlement and came to this spot. They bought and prepared land and built houses there. Then, when the inundation began they left the village, Vasanya Adam, about a dozen families together, by boat.

She recounted: "When the surging water began to engulf our homes, all members of the family, men and women alike, worked hand in hand to save the furniture, utensils and other belongings. There was no scope for anyone to sit idle."

The Kaptai lake not only devoured land and homestead, but also swallowed the original palace of the Chakma King, many shrines, bazars and schools.

Bhogadatta Khisa, (62), a doctor by training, was a student in Dhaka while the dam was being built. He had a habit of roaming around different parts of the Hill Tracts region on foot when he came home on vacations. He extensively travelled the northern part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts district before the dam was in place.

According to Bhogadatta Khisa, many Buddhist shrines (monastaries) were devoured by the lake. He particularly mentioned those impressive and famous ones which were



located in Boradam, Jhagrabil Balya, Mohanprum, Bergi Baradon, Machyalchara (Mohalchari), Pethanyamachara (Langdu). The most impressive shrine one was in the mansion of the Chakma King. A massive ancient Hindu shrine in Naniarchar was also lost to the lake.

Eye witnesses said the present Chakma palace was no match for the original one. The original mansion was built by the 48th Chakma Raja, Bhubon Mohan Roy, in the early part of this century. It was a huge, two-storey structure that attracted people for its architectural splendour and beauty. The top section of the remnants of the palace can still be seen when the water level of the lake falls.

There were many bazars along both sides of the Karnaphuli. Among the prominent were Rangamati Bazar, Naniarchar Bazar, Kattali Bazar and Reingkhong Bazar. Each of these bazars sat once a week. On the bazar day, traders came with supplies of various goods and products such as oil, salt, chillies and onions in big boats from Chittagong by the Karnaphuli. These traders were called 'Vasanya Bepari' (floating traders) by the locals.

## ***BEYOND BELIEF***

Before 1960 the people in general had no idea that the natural flow of a river could be halted or controlled with a dam. They simply could not come to terms with the idea, a soon-to-be reality, that the Kaptai dam would be able to halt the flow of the Karnaphuli. That was why many people took shelter on the nearby hills and roads rather than leave the place when the flooding began to swallow the area. They thought that the water would recede soon and they would be able to return to their homes.

When the area was being surveyed, the inhabitants thought the government was carrying out studies to impose taxes on the land. Many even thought they would be removed in order to reserve the place for raising bamboo plantations to meet the raw material needs of the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. Thus they lacked a proper appreciation of the nature and extent of the dam's aftermath.



Shankhamala Chakma, (60), of Keretkaba village in Rangamati thana said her late husband believed the dam and the resulting lake would not last long, 'so, why should we unnecessarily shift from this place to somewhere else, to avoid a temporary inconvenience?' her husband had argued. Moreover, if they moved even for a few months the schooling of the children would be disrupted.

Shankhamala sighed and said: "So, we did not leave the village, rather went up a nearby hill. But as a matter of misfortune, you know, our son, who was the main reason we stayed, died later after a long illness. His father also died of TB. But the water has never gone down again!"

Describing those days, Omar Ali said: "It is true that there were announcements urging people to evacuate the area and promising compensation, but that was just a cursory effort. No public meetings were held, no adequate campaigns were made to properly inform them about why the dam was being built, why they had to move to safe places or what the situation would really be like after the dam was in place.

"Many even believed that there would be no inundation at all and hence they simply did not prepare for evacuation. Those families which thought that way had to suffer most. When the flooding ensued many people took to high land. As those places too went under the water they moved further up the hills and finally they just floated from one place to another as they had not arranged any shelter for themselves, Omar said."

Amar Jyoti Chakma, (55), of Mogban union said: "Almost everybody thought that the dam would certainly collapse. So, why move elsewhere? I was then just a young man of 16 or 17 years, but grown-up enough to understand quite a few things. Still, I remember many of our elderly people saying that the government was doing those works to levy taxes on our land. They were rather worried about paying taxes as they did not have to pay such taxes then. Only Headmen collected revenue on a yearly basis. But finally we had to quit as the real flooding occurred."

Punya Sen Karbari, (80), of Baghaichari village said: "We had been hearing that a dam was being constructed at Kaptai. One



day I, along with my family, went from our village Kattoli to Chitmaram in Kaptai to see the work with our own eyes. I remember we went up the monastery building there to view the construction activities."

Punya Sen too did not believe that the dam would last. Even if it lasted he did not accept the possibility that the water would come as far as their village, Kattoli.

He was then a college student and knew that a lot of bamboo was needed for the production of paper at the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. Earlier, like many others, he and his friends thought the area was being vacated for bamboo cultivation.

### ***CULTIVABLE LAND: PAST AND PRESENT***

According to Advocate Gyanendu Bikash Chakma, a member of the Rangamati Local Government Council, the government allotted only 21,000 acres of cultivable land to the uprooted families, while a total of 54,000 acres had been lost to the Kaptai Hydro-electric Project.

Many displaced people complained that the government commitment to compensate their lost arable land with similar land in new areas, was not kept. Displaced families were given a maximum of 10 acres even if they had owned many times. Many were also given hills or hilly land in place of fertile plain land.

Modhumangal Karbari, (50), of Mirjibal village under Paanchari thana said they had 14 acres of plain farm land in the project area, but were given just two acres of hilly land as compensation. Although they had applied for farm land, they failed to receive any such land. Therefore, eventually they came to settle in Paanchari where they purchased arable plain land at the rate of Tk.2000 per acre. But, they were compensated for the plain land lost to the project at the rate of Tk.200 to Tk.300 per acre only.

Ananga Mohan Chakma, (70), is a new settler in the Boradan village of Rangamati. Before the dam was constructed he and his brother had 10 acres under paddy cultivation and four for other purposes, in the project area. After the dam displaced



them, they were provided with just 10 acres of hill - no plain cultivable land.

In a voice that betrayed his deep anguish he said: "You know, we had not even cared to come to these hills before the dam was constructed. As we had no other option we had to labour very hard for quite a long time to make this hill suitable for cultivation. Even then, all the hill could not be brought under cultivation. We only till part of it and that too depends on the lake water."

"Why?"

"It is a fringe land, just adjacent to the lake. If the water level of the lake rises more than normal the land remains under water and naturally it cannot be cultivated."

Gradual destruction of forests and resurgence of Jhum cultivation with shorter cycles have taken their toll on the agriculture of the region. Due to an incessant erosion of soil from the hills as a result of increased Jhum farming, the various tributaries of the Karnaphuli are silting up while it is becoming increasingly difficult to cultivate the fringe land around the lake due both to excessive rains and drought. The water level of Kaptai lake now does not rise or fall as projected.

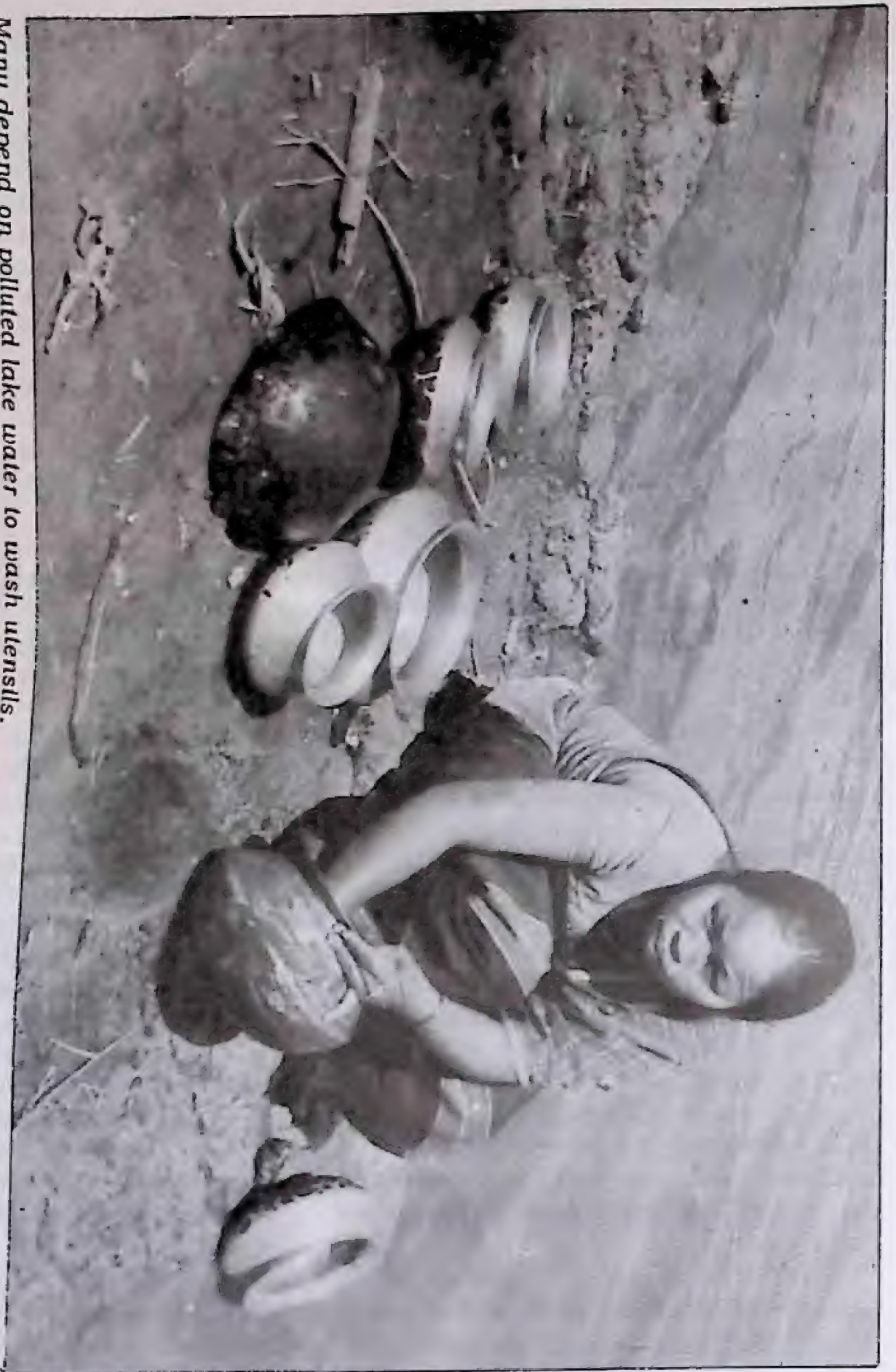
According to an estimate of the Rangamati Agriculture Extension Department, a total of 36,000 acres of fringe land around the lake are cultivated. Of them 2000 acres stretch from 27 to 30 metres into the lake, 6000 acres from 30 to 32 metres, 22,000 acres from 32 to 35 metres and the remaining 6000 acres from 35 to 38 metres.

As the water level goes down, during the dry season, paddy seedlings are planted in those land. After the paddy is harvested the land become filled with weeds. They die a natural death and rot under water when the water level goes up again. This is the process by which these land are used for cultivation.

According to a decision of the Kaptai lake governing body, the water level of the lake is maintained at 25 metres upto June 1. The water is stored in the lake during the monsoon when



*Many depend on polluted lake water to wash utensils.*





heavy rainfalls and onrush of water from the upstream of the Karnaphuli take place. The water is released during the dry season. So, the cultivation of the fringe land largely depends on the rise and fall of the level of water in the lake.

A higher than normal rise in the water level due to excessive rains damages crops while a lower level resulting from drought or lack of rains makes it impossible to undertake cultivation in these land. If the water level remains low, power generation as well as navigability of the river also suffer greatly.

Mukunda Lal Chakma and Punya Sen Karbari said even eight to ten years ago floods seldom occurred in Baghaichari. But over the past few years, the onrush of water down the hills has become a regular phenomenon causing serious damage to crops. Also due to siltation, Kasalong river overflows and sweeps away the standing crops on both sides almost every year. But neither Mukunda Lal Chakma nor Punya Sen Karbari is aware that the overflow of water is a result of siltation on the river bed.

They also said launches could ply earlier up to Baghaichari thana ghat through the Kasalong river for about eight months of the year, while now they could come upto this ghat only for four to five months of the year. This had been causing serious inconveniences to their movement. They said for the most part of the year now they have to first travel 15 to 20 km on foot to reach a ghat where they board the launches to go to Rangamati town.

Punya Sen Karbari complained that although they were promised before the construction of the dam that they would be provided with a better and efficient transport system, little was done following the implementation of the project. The only difference, they added, was that in those days they travelled by Sampan (country boat) from Kottli to Rangamati town while now they travel in launches.

Baradananda Chakma and Ananga Mohan Chakma also expressed similar grievances. They said they had to depend on the mercy of the lake for cultivating the fringe land they were provided with as compensation. While in some years, they added, swelling water of the lake sweeps away the crops, in



some other years they have to leave the land uncultivated due to lack of water. They cited the example of 1994 when they could not till their land as there was little rain and the water level in the lake was lower than normal.

Baradananda explained that after the seedlings were planted if there was not adequate rain the plants did not grow enough and the harvest turned out to be quite poor. This was particularly painful and ironic because they had land so near the lake, but there was no facility to irrigate the land.

"Storms and rains, water and drought determine whether we will have crops or not", Ananga Mohan said adding that a lack of rains also adversely affected Jhum cultivation. If there was no rain during the Bengali months of Baishakh and Jaisthya when seeds of various crops, including paddy, were sown for Jhum cultivation, the tender plants, after coming out of the seeds, soon died.

Baradananda Chakma, (70), of the same village was a Headman from 1949 to 1972. He was also compensated with 10 acres of hill against a total of 12 acres of plain land, eight acres of them paddy land and the rest used for other purposes.

Gunamani Mahajan of Bandarban district said his family had about 45 acres of good quality land on which they grew paddy. All the land went into the lake. But they received no land although they had applied for compensation in a proper way. Instead, they were compensated with money at the rate of only Tk.200 per acre. All the land he currently owns was bought later.

Shilabrata Tangchangya of Koyapara village had a total of three acres of cultivable land in Dighalchari, his original village, which was devoured by the lake. He too was not given any plain cultivable land. Some patches of hilly areas were allotted to him. In addition to that, a small amount of cash was given.

Abul Kashem of Puranbasti village also did not receive any farm land after his family had been uprooted by the dam. Before the dam was in place he had four acres of fertile paddy



land. He was provided with just a two-acre portion of a hill as compensation.

Sharat Chandra Baidya, father of Mukunda Lal Chakma of Baghaichari, was the leader of one of the many small groups of uprooted families. His family had 55 acres of paddy land in Vasanya Adam village of Langdu thana. They were given only 10 acres as compensation, a major part of which was hill.

Said Mukunda Lal: "No family was given the same amount of land as taken from it for the Kaptai project. Those families which owned relatively large acreages of land were at best compensated at the rate of one acre per member of the family. And at that rate, as we were a 10-member family, we were given 10 acres." But, again, if a family had more than 10 members it was not given more than a total of 10 acres, he added. Ten acres was the upper limit.

Punya Sen Karbari of the same village said his family had a total of 22 acres, all of which went under the lake water. There were nine members in their family and they were provided with nine acres. Moreover, the land they were given was mostly jungle. They had to spend a lot of money and many days of labour to make the land suitable for farming.

The story of Milon Tripura of Rajmoni Para in Balu Khali union is different, but more painful.

His family had a few acres of arable land registered in the name of his late father Singha Lal Tripura who worked for the British army during the Second World War as a local scout. All of his land was devoured by the lake. He failed to obtain any land as compensation, either plain land or hills, as he missed filling out the form, an essential requirement to get compensation for the lost land.

Recounted Milon Tripura: "You know, I am a man without any education. I did not understand the importance of different forms. When I came to understand about these things from other people, it was too late for me."



## DESTINATION UNKNOWN

With the commissioning of the dam journey of thousands of uprooted families for a new life began on an uncertain path and to an unknown destination.

Modhumangal Karbari, (65), presently of Mirjibal village in Paanchari thana, said his heart first could not bear the thought of leaving behind the place where his family lived for ages. So he took shelter on an adjacent hill with the hope that the water would recede and they would be able to return to their houses. But soon he realised it was impossible to stay on and the compensation money would also dry up too.

Modhumangal had some schooling and he was intelligent. One day he sat with his fellow villagers who were, like him, trying to cling to their paternal village. He explained the situation and discussed alternatives. They agreed that they had to leave Rangamati and begin life anew. Then some of them teamed up in a group and left in search of land. After a few days' scouting they arrived at Paanchari, a village close to the Indian border.

They liked the place and land was available for purchase. They bought land at the rate of Tk.1,000 per acre. Before returning to Rangamati to collect their families, they cleared and levelled the land, and prepared it for raising houses.

On a winter morning, about a dozen families, led by Modhumangal, began their journey to their new destination. The elders wept in tears of pain for leaving their ancestral homes, while the younger ones were anxious about the uncertainty of the life that lay ahead.

After travelling for two days and two nights by boats, they reached Mahalchari thana headquarters. The boat journey was over, but it was still a long way to go. They continued their migration on foot and the last leg of the long trek was made in a couple of old, dilapidated unhooded jeeps left by the British.

In an anguished voice, Modhumangal said: "How can we make you feel the agonies we felt when we lost our homes? How can



you realise the pains and sufferings we have been enduring for the last 36 years?

"You know we have failed to attain even half the standard of our previous life after such a long and arduous struggle?"

Punya Sen Karbari was an inhabitant of Kattoli village in Langdu thana before the Kaptai dam was constructed. His family, along with some other neighbours, left Kattoli as soon as the water began to swallow the village. They also came by boats to Baghaichari, a village many kilometres up the Karnaphuli. Their boat journey took four days. After the long journey they thought they had found a safe place and halted. But more shock was in store for them as they did not realise the lake would reach that far. But it did indeed and they had to move for a second time.

The families of Punya Sen and his fellow villagers lived in the first place for two years and moved in 1964 to their present place where they cleared the jungles to build their homes.

"It was like a bad dream when the lake also devoured the place we settled in first. We were rendered homeless twice in our life, Punya Sen said.

Gunamani Mahajon, (80), came from Reingkhong village of Baghaichari thana. He now lives in Balaghat village under Bandarban district. A member of the Tangchangya tribe, age has begun to deteriorate his sight and hearing. His memory, particularly of the nightmarish flooding that followed the installation of the dam, is, however, still very fresh.

In a choked voice he narrated: "Our home was situated about eight or nine miles north east of the dam site. There was a hill nearby, dotted with big trees. We had plenty of farm land on both sides of the Rein Khong river ( a tributary of the Karnaphuli). We had to leave our village, the village where our forefathers lived."

He went on to explain that they took shelter on an adjacent hill when the water began to engulf their house, then they started pondering over what to do and where to go.



Gunamani's family had suffered displacement before. His forefathers had migrated to that area from the Salak village of Sublong union in Barkal thana in 1860 when the British rulers acquired that part of the region for teak plantations. The Kaptai dam turned them into regugees for a second time.

Haunted by the memories of displacement from Sublong, Gunamani ventured this time to the south, as Sublong was to the north of the dam. He and some of his neighbours then set out to find a suitable place where land was available for cultivation. They travelled a long distance, surveying a vast area they reached Kalurghat of Chittagong, then went further south-east and finally came to Bandarban.

Balaghat area was then a dense jungle, but the land was plain. They decided to settle there. Eventually in 1962, they migrated to this village, a place about 160 km from their village that went under the lake water.

### **THE TRAGEDY OF SPLITS**

The Kaptai dam not only rendered thousands homeless, it also forced innumerable uprooted families to split for ever and suffer the emotional trauma of separation from their kins.

They separated from their in-laws, neighbours, co-villagers and fellow community members. Those families, which were once intimate components of a closely knit community, were never to see one another again.

Some members of the same village went south, some went north, some went east and some went west while some others managed to remain in nearby localities.

Joint families were divided as the family of one male member settled in a certain place while the family of another male member settled elsewhere. Many men and women today do not see those with whom they spent their early life and played; many sons no longer see their mothers while many brothers their sisters.

Baradananda Chakma said before the construction of the dam they, five brothers in all, lived together in a joint family. As the



dam displaced them, his eldest brother Satish Chandra Chakma left for India while the three younger brothers, Amrita Lal, Dibakar and Nirendra Lal, left in three different directions with their own families while he managed to stay back in the nearby Mogban village.

His younger brothers have already died. Although there has been communication and visits among these four families, they have never seen their eldest brothers again after he left for India. They do not even know the whereabouts of his family.

"The dam has torn us apart," sighed Baradananda Chakma.

Ganjabi Chakma, the elder sister of Mukunda Lal Chakma of Baghaichari, was married to a co-villager before the dam was installed. After the lake devoured their village, Ganjabi's family too set out on a tragic trail which eventually led them to India. They settled in Meghalaya State.

Pottepudi Chakma said: "We heard they (Ganjabi's family) had to endure a lot of indignity and persecution as refugees by the local tribal people in their early days. They have, however, become citizens of India recently."

Mukunda Lal Chakma said his family had communication with the family of his sister, but they had never seen each other again. He said many of those who were his friends and playmates in his early life went to India. They were split for ever.

Gyan Bikash Tangchangya, (65), of Rajasthali said he was one of five brothers and they had all lived in the same village before the lake devoured it. Although they were not a joint family, they shared both pains and pleasures and worked shoulder to shoulder whenever required in any situation. It was such a helpful way of living in the same community.

But they no longer have that scope. Now they are scattered across various parts of the region. The communication between them has become so rare that they may only see each other once in a couple of years. Gyan Bikash Chakma has settled in Rajasthali while his brothers left for two different localities, Taktanala and Arachari, both in Bilaichari thana.



*Water for drinking and other purposes comes from wells in many areas.*





The Kaptai dam also separated Muktalata Chakma from her son Suniti Sadhan Chakma. Suniti Chakma chose to join the 40,000 people who made their way to India. Muktalata, like many other mothers, was compelled to live with the pain of not being with her own son.

But, in an ironical twist of fate, Muktalata reunited again with her son, although only for a brief period, when she, along with many other refugees, fled to India in 1989 as unrest spread in the region. Her husband, Jagat Chandra Chakma, died in a refugee camp while in India. In tears, she said perhaps she would never see her son again now she had returned from India.

### ***HAPPINESS IS A PAST CHAPTER***

Mukunda Lal Chakma, (75), cannot forget those days. How can he? Those were the happy days of his life.

"The Kaptai lake has snatched away the happiness of our life. It has uprooted from our homes and turned us into refugees. The memory of the flooding still evokes fear and brings tears to our eyes," a deeply aggrieved Mukunda Lal, said.

Mukunda Lal's family was displaced from the Vasanya Adam village of Langdu thana and now lives in Baghaichari village of Rangamati district.

Baradananda Chakma, (85), of Mogban union in Rangamati retorted: "What's the use now digging up the past? Why do you ask how our life is now and how it was before the dam?"

He took a while to control his emotion, then sighed and said in a calm voice: "Don't mind," and pointing to the lake he continued. "There, deep under the water of the lake, lies our village. We had everything then. We had a cattleshed full of cows and a gola (paddy godown) full of rice. There were plenty of poultry birds. The crop field over there with rich golden paddy was indeed a sight to see! And fish? If we wanted fish for a meal we just went to the nearby Karnaphuli with a net."

Then glancing around his house he added: "This place, where now we are seated, was a dense jungle, very dense indeed.



People rarely got by this place as it was then home to many wild beasts like tigers, bears, elephants and wild boars."

Baradananda said all the compensation money was spent clearing the jungle to make the place habitable and building the houses. Since then, poverty has been a constant companion for them, he said. The life they had been living had always been full of woes and hardship.

Nakyabi Chakma, (55), was married to Chitta Ranjan Chakma five years before the dam was constructed. They lived in Chota Mohanprum village. She now lives at Debashish Nagar in Rangamati town.

For Nakyabi Chakma's family, the journey from their lost village to their present home was not an easy one. It was indeed a much more painful trail than most of those rendered homeless by the dam.

Nakyabi's husband lived in a joint family before the project was implemented. Chitta Ranjan had two brothers and three sisters. Their's was a happy family Nakyabi said: "The dam has not only rendered us homeless and turned us into poor refugees but it has also broken up our family."

Chitta Ranjan Chakma was a member of the East Pakistan Rifles (now BDR). After the family had lost its home to the lake he left his job in frustration. He split with his joint family and, taking his wife and children with him, went to settle in Paanchari village of Khagrachari thana along with some other uprooted families of his village. The new settlement they founded in Paanchari was named 'Larma Para' after the prominent Larma clan which constituted a large part of the new settlement.

However, Chitta Ranjan's mind did not settle in the new home. Haunted by the happy memory of the life left behind in Chhota Mohanprum village, he wound up his chapter in Paanchari about six years after he had settled there and set out on a return journey to his old home. But how could he get back to his beloved Chhota Mohanprum? It was under water! So, he raised his new house in a nearby village named Burighat.



But tragedy struck Nakyabi's family yet again. After two to three years, one fateful day her husband was slain by some unknown assailants on his way to the local market. Nakyabi's family was forced again to search for a permanent home as she no longer wanted to live in that cursed area near the lake. Finally, she settled in the village where her family now lives.

The rest of Chitta Ranjan's joint family also separated. His younger brother left for India immediately after the dam had rendered them homeless, while his elder brother settled in Krishnamachara village of Naniarchar thana.

Nakyabi firmly believes if the three brothers lived together her husband would not have been killed.

### **WRONGED AND ABANDONED**

Lack of cultivable land and the absence of a comprehensive rehabilitation plan coupled with inadequate compensation packages greatly impeded, in various ways, a proper resettlement of the families displaced and made their lives miserable. Many families ended up cash-strapped in a few days, after spending whatever compensation money they had received on settling in new places, and then faced starvation or half-starvation.

The government's obligation was fulfilled by merely doling out some money to the displaced families and indicating some areas, mostly uninhabitable and difficult-to-settle, for their rehabilitation.

Due to the indifference and negligence of the government, many families, even decades after their displacement, still live in fear that they will be rendered homeless again. This is particularly the case for those families which have settled in areas near the reserve forests. They are now again faced with the threat of being evicted from their houses as part of the Forest Department's plans to expand forest cover.

The compensation for cultivable land was fixed at the rate of Tk.250 per acre on average, and for homestead land at the rate of Tk.400 per acre.



Moreover, in those days tribal people did not consider their homestead land separately from cultivable land, therefore most of the displaced families did not receive compensation for their homestead land at the rate of Tk.400. They only obtained compensation for trees and plantations they raised in and around the homesteads.

According to a report on the Karnaphuli Multipurpose Project, the rate of compensation for cultivable land acquired for Kaptai dam was the same as the rate given for the land acquired for the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. But the location of the paper mills was set up did not include any cultivable land. So, the owners of cultivable land under the Kaptai dam project area received much less than a fair price for their land.

The present Chakma Raja Debashish Roy said besides affecting the economy of the area, the commissioning of the dam has disrupted social life.

"In a couple of days villages and families were separated. A number of Chakma families were sent to far away places, in a hostile environment," he said.

He complained the survey mechanism was faulty and "the government failed to compensate as promised."

He said the thousands of families who crossed into India are now living in Arunachal State there.

Explaining the present situation, the Raja said the government never thought of wiping out the resentment and if compensation and rehabilitation were efficient then there would have been no commotion. Moreover, the compensation process was also corrupt, he said.

"Resettlement was and is still a major issue here. Besides, the influx of the Bengalis has created a sense of insecurity among the Chakmas," he said.

The Raja said the local people did not participate in the planning or implementation process of the Kaptai project. There were protests against the project and "Manabendra



Larma was one who relentlessly led the opposition against the dam."

Debashish Roy said the displaced families were not given the same amount of cultivable land as they had lost to the dam. They were given much less. They were promised they would be fully compensated for the land claimed by the project. But the land allocated in return was infertile and difficult to cultivate.

People got hills against cultivable land also due to errors made while recording the types of the land during the survey, it was said. All these factors greatly contributed to the sufferings of the uprooted people.

Charu Bikash Chakma said: "The price of land fixed under the compensation programme was much less than the prevailing market rates. This way the affected people were also deprived of their due compensation." The compensation for 'A' category land was Tk.600 per acre, for 'B' category land Tk.400 and for 'C' category land Tk.300.

Official records show the compensation for every acre of arable land was fixed at Tk.250, which was the same for the land acquired for the Karnaphuli Paper Mills at Chandraghona. The compensation for every homestead was fixed at Tk.400 irrespective of the size of the holding.

Charu's father had five brothers in their joint family and they had together owned 100 acres of cultivable land. They received a total of Tk.6,000 for their land, at the rate of Tk.600 per acre. But, he complained, the market rate of their land then was at least Tk.2000 per acre.

He added: "Apart from the compensation for land, it was also promised that the displaced people would be provided with free food rations for the following 10 years. This pledge was not fulfilled. The uprooted people exhausted their compensation money within four to five months and then they simply starved. No transit camps were set up nor any medical teams formed for the floating displaced families. After the area went under water there was also hardly anything to sell or buy in the locality.



"People also suffered heavily as there was little scope for any work. The government, when acquiring their land for the project, had promised that there would be vocational skill training programmes and bank loans for the affected people, but that promise was also not fulfilled."

Charu Bikash Chakma also alleged malpractices in the disbursement of the compensation money. He observed: "If the evicted people received more than what they had lost to the dam then they might have come to terms with their displacement. But since they did not receive even nearly what they had lost, the feeling that they were unpardonably wronged never left them. And that is why, even after 35 years, they cannot accept the dam."

Omar Ali said: "Even though the government had made a commitment that the uprooted people would be properly rehabilitated, there would be transit camps to facilitate their rehabilitation and they would be provided with rations of food, practically nothing of that sort was done."

For four to five years after the dam's construction the displaced people had to work hard to reconstruct their lives. "They had to clear the jungles to reclaim land for raising new homes absolutely on their own, without any help or support from the government," he said.

Omar Ali further complained: "We were given land here for fresh settlement. We have been living here for the last 35 to 36 years. But now we are being told that this area belongs to the Forest Department. We are now faced with the threat of being displaced again."

Baradananda Chakma said: "Whatever money the government had given us as compensation was used to build new homes for our families after clearing the jungles. We had to eat little, and even starved on many occasions as there was virtually no work in the new localities. You know, unlike today, trees or bamboos had little selling value and few people in those days were familiar with fishing as a means of living. Many of us had to dispose of our gold ornaments or other valuables for survival."



Baradananda said the education of their children suffered because there was no school in the new locality where they resettled. They also suffered a lack of potable drinking water. Even today this problem persists as there is no tubewell in their village. They have no choice but to drink river water at great risk.

Punya Sen Karbari stated: We received from Tk.300 to Tk.400 per acre for our land acquired for the project. The compensation money was spent preparing the uninhabitable jungles for new settlements, raising new houses and shifting from the old village. We were also compelled to part with a big chunk of our scarce money to treat the numerous diseases which attacked us after we came to this place.

"In those days, there was a quack in this locality. He was known as 'Bamna' (dwarf). But, on the contrary, his fee for visiting patients was quite high and he used to charge exorbitant prices for the medicines that could only be bought from him. He even charged Tk. 10 to 15 for a tablet! You know, it was quite a big amount of money then. Bamna, however, later left for India."

Punya Sen said diseases were a common feature in their new habitations in the early days.

He said: "There was virtually not a single family whose members did not suffer from one illness or another. Many people died too. It was a time which we shall never forget because it was a terrible time. We suffered in so many ways. There was little food and a lack of drinking water. Medical facilities were practically non-existent. Neither were there any school for the children. Daily necessities were extremely dear. Even the wild trees with fruits were quickly stripped by the foraging hungry people. Many people survived just on things like wild potatoes and tender bamboo offshoots. I can still hear the groans of the starved people, particularly those people who did not have land.

"We were told by the government officials when they took away our land and homes for the dam that we would be given work, jobs and food. We would be given electric power that would be



*Nripati Tripura and Sukumar Tripura of Rajapur depend on the forest for fuelwood.*





generated by the dam. But later, when we settled in our new localities, we never saw them again."

Pottepudi Chakma said after they had settled in Baghaichari village, the first year they worked hard to clear the land to grow crops. But the fate wasn't kind to them and their crops were destroyed by rats. The old folks of Baghaichari still refer to that year as the 'Year of Rat Flood' as rodents reigned supreme.

Pottepudi added: "Therefore, in the next year, our woes knew no bounds. There was no food and no money. It was a miserable life then. Many people fled from this awful condition to India that year.

"We, the female members of the family, rummaged through the wild jungles in search of roots and offshoots of various plants which could be cooked and eaten as food. We even braved the wild animals like tigers and bears to collect whatever was available from the woods.

"On such an occasion," she recalled, 'A girl was attacked and injured by a tiger. Her family later migrated to India."

Meraji Karbari, (70), of Koyapara village of Bandarban district said: "We did not shift to this village immediately after the dam was built. We had taken shelter first on a hill near our village that went into the lake. We kept on struggling for a year to cling to our ancestral village, but in vain. Meanwhile, all the compensation money we got was exhausted. We received no further assistance. After the year was over when we came to this present village, we had nothing in our possession but a few utensils and a bare minimum of clothes.

"We suffered really bad times in those days. Life sometimes seemed unbearable. On the one hand, we worked like we had never worked before to build the minimum shelter for us, on the other, we had to work as day labourer to earn our livelihood. And as there was no work available nearby, we had to travel long distances for the purpose.

"You ask about schools?" shot back Meraji to a query. "No, there was no school in this vicinity then. Even if there was



how could we send our children to study when we employed them to earn money for survival?"

Gyan Bikash Tangchangya of Rajasthali said: "The government gave us this land for resettlement after we were turned into refugees by the dam. Over the last three decades we have developed this locality, planted various trees here and we have been paying taxes too. Now the Forest Department claims that this area belongs to it and we have no right to this land.

It was not our responsibility to know whether this was reserve forest or not. We only know that we were given this property as compensation when we were displaced from our paternal home by the Kaptai dam. So the government, or the Forest Department for that matter, has no right to say that we do not have any right to this land."

## **OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE CHANGES**

It was not so long ago that agriculture was the only occupation of the local people where each tribe was a somewhat self-reliant community. Although a substantial portion of the region consisted of plain land, in the form of wide and narrow patches in between the numerous hills that mark the landscape, they grew crops only on the hills. This indigenous way of cultivation was called the Jhum (Swidden) system.

The Swidden system (slash and burn) of cultivation is common to all South-east Asian countries. It is called Chena in Sri Lanka, Lading in the Philippines and Taungya in Myanmar.

In Bangladesh it is called Jhum by the Chakmas and Bengalis, and Lubneya by the Mru. In this system of cultivation, a new plot is laid out when the Jhumia (the cultivator) clears a patch of forest or scrub by cutting down the smaller trees and burning the under-growth. This is usually done in January and February. It is estimated that a small family can Jhum, on an average, five acres of land.



When the fertility of an area is exhausted, the Jhumia moves to a new place. It is argued that this type of cultivation destroys the higher forest, spreads weeds, intensifies erosion and is not amenable with better methods of agronomy. There is a second opinion which says Jhum cultivation does not affect the fertility of land because after a cycle is over, the land is left free for regeneration.

There was a time when the whole local population grew crops only by the Jhum system. They took up one hill after another for cultivation year by year. As the population then was relatively thin and there were plenty of hills available for Jhum cultivation every year, and as the yields were also good, the population did not try otherwise and left the plain land uncultivated.

In the 1870s, when the British administration took up a programme to grow teak wood extensively on the hills of the region large number of families were transferred to the plain land and steps were taken to induce them to shift from Jhum cultivation to plain land farming through ploughing. In course of time, as hills for Jhum cultivation were made less and less available and as strong efforts continued to expand cultivation of plain land, many families eventually took to ploughing the plain land.

However, still many families maintained Jhum cultivation on hills since even all the plain land put together was not enough to sustain the total population of the region.

The situation took somewhat a reverse turn after the commissioning of the dam. A serious crisis resulted from the permanent inundation of 54,000 acres of farming land by the Kaptai lake. A huge number of displaced farming families, now already plain land cultivators, reverted to Jhum cultivation.

According to an estimate, there were a total of 14,000 Jhumia families in the region in 1901 and the Jhum cycle spread over 10 to 12 years. In 1961, the number of the families went up to 21,632 while the cycle declined to three to five years. It is quite logically assumed that the number of the families further rose while the cycle slimmed during the last 36 years.



As the local people were not acquainted, a number of Bengali families were brought into the region from Rangunia of Chittagong district by the government to train the locals in the techniques of plain land farming.

Plain land farming turned out to be superior to Jhum cultivation on several counts. Especially, because the Jhum system required much more physical labour than the cultivation of plain land did. The campaign for cultivation of plain land was also consistently and meticulously followed-up by the authorities. Gradually the local people converted to ploughing the plain land for crop production. By 1960, all the plain land, except the reserve forest areas in the region, came under cultivation.

Due to the loss of plain land, a section of the uprooted people resumed Jhum cultivation which they or their predecessors had given up earlier. Many of the affected people were also forced to take up activities for survival which were completely foreign to them. The revised list of their vocations became quite broad including activities such as fishing, fruit plantation, extraction of wild bamboos and felling of trees for sale. Before the construction of the dam, tribals did not practice any of these occupations, but the loss of land, coupled with a rise in the population of the region, gave them little choice.

Shilabrata Tangchangya said: "Before the dam was built, while we lived in our original village Dighalchari, none of our clan member was either engaged in Jhum cultivation or worked as hired labour for living. We had then enough plain land to work round the year. But now, after the dam compelled us to migrate here, we have become Jhumias. We have also to work as wage labourers on others' land. When there is no work available as wage-labourers we fell or collect trees or bamboos from forests for survival. And you know, despite working very hard we never have enough money to manage even two square meals a day."

The story of Sanatan Tangchangya, (62), of Koyapara village is a little bit different but the essence is the same. They were two brothers living in a joint family before the lake devoured their home and land. All the land of their family, however, was



registered in the name of his elder brother. They were not familiar with the phenomenon of poverty then. The land was enough to sustain their family.

After the land went into the lake his brother split with him and he was virtually abandoned. As all the family land was owned in the name of his brother, Sanatan did not receive any kind of land, plain or hilly, as compensation. And since then he has been living in abject poverty and hardship.

Sanatan said: "Now I maintain my family either by working as a day labourer or by selling bamboos and tress which I manage to collect from the jungles when there is no or little work. Our woes continues since the dam was built. Had there not been this dam we would have still been tilling our own land."

There is a small village market named Aulad Bazar in Mogban union of Rangamati. Situated on the bank of the Karnaphuli, it accommodates about a dozen shops. Most of the owners are Chakmas. The owners said shopkeeping was not their hereditary profession. Apart from running these shops during the day time, they fish at night to supplement their income.

Mogban union, where around six thousand people live, is located somewhere in the middle of the area between Kaptai and Rangamati. As there was no market or hut in the locality previously, the local people had to travel 10 to 16 km by boat, either to Kaptai or to Rangamati, to buy daily necessities or sell their produces. So, the need for a bazar in the vicinity was felt and the market was gradually developed.

Amar Jyoti Chakma, who runs a shop in this bazar, said he was a farmer before the dam displaced his family from their original home and land. He said he never even dreamt of becoming a shopkeeper. But the onrush of water swept away their existing way of life. He was given a plot of hilly land as compensation against the farming land he had lost to the Kaptai project. He planted various fruit trees, mostly mango and jackfruit, on that piece of land. He also tried Jhum cultivation on it the year after he settled into his new home. But it did not work out and he soon realised that he had to do something else for survival.



He started locating stocks of bamboos and other trees in the jungles which he felled and sold. But in a year or two there were few bamboos or trees to be felled left and again he felt it was time to look for some other way to keep their bodies and souls together. He then started fishing during the night and sold his catch in the morning to the middlemen who took them to the towns. But during the day he had nothing to do and kept idle.

Amar Jyoti Chakma said: "I then began to wonder how I could make use of my spare time for making a little extra money. And then the idea of setting up a shop struck my mind.

"I go to Rangamati town once or twice a week to buy the supplies for the shop.

"It's not that I make a great deal of money from shopkeeping, but two sources of income are obviously better than one. Now, I catch fish during the night while I run the shop in the day."

Amar Jyoti said nobody in that region earlier thought of selling fish to maintain their family before the Kaptai project was implemented. They only fished for their family consumption in the nearby Karnaphuli which was always full of various fishes. But the loss of their cultivable land to the dam project forced them to take to fishing for survival. He said most of the people in Mogban union had turned to fishing.

Nripati Ranjan Tripura, (70), now an inhabitant of Rajmoni Para village in Baghaichari union, was also a cultivator originally. He now owns no paddy land as the authorities gave him only two acres of hill as compensation against his cultivable land that was devoured by the lake. The plantation does not need full-time caring nor does it generate enough income to support his family, even for a couple of months. He, therefore, took to fishing at night as his primary source of income.

He has, however, found other means to supplement his income. Whenever possible he collects bamboos, fells trees and procures plants from the reserve forest and sells them. He sells the chopped trees and plants as fuelwood in Rangamati Bazar. A bundle of one hundred bambos, he said, fetched him Tk.120



to Tk.125 while a bundle of fuelwood sold for Tk.90 to Tk.100. He said most of the people in Rajmoni Para village earned their living in the same way.

Seema Tripura, (26), a young housewife of the same village, said her husband Pradip Kumar Tripura caught fish in the Karnaphuli and took them to Rangamati town to sell. But the income from fishing is not sufficient to maintain their family and therefore she rears poultry birds, pigs and brews indigenous liquor to supplement the family income.

Kalpana Tripura, (27), wife of Ananda Tripura of the same village, said their family depended on the incomes of both her husband and herself. Her husband mainly collects bamboos and wood from jungles to sell. He also catches fish when he can borrow a net as he himself does not own one. Kalpana, on the other hand, raises pigs and goats and brews liquor to contribute to the family purse.

## **ASSAULT ON FORESTS**

The Kaptai dam has also taken its toll on the forests, both natural and the reserve plantations that were developed under the government afforestation plans. A staggering 75 sq. km of reserve forest areas and another 600 sq. km of unclassified forest areas went into the Kaptai lake. The permanent inundation of as much as 40 per cent of the total cultivable land along with a vast human habitation resulted in a massive destruction of forest resources. The depletion took place due to reclamation of land for both cultivation and settlement purposes. As a result, vast tracts of both reserve and unclassified natural forests on plain land were destroyed.

According to the Chittagong Hill Tracts District Gazetteer 1975, a total of 54,000 acres under cultivation were devoured by the lake and a total of 21,522 acres of cultivable land were reclaimed by clearing the forests. In the Kasalong Reserve Forest under Baghaichari thana alone, 100 sq. km of forests were destroyed to reclaim 10,000 acres for farming.

Cultivable land were also extracted by destroying vast tracts of forest areas in the Chengi basin under Khagrachari district. Plain land forests in large parts of Rangamati and Bandarban





*Amar Jyoti Chakma*



*Omar Ali*

*Nripati Tripura*



*Pottepudi Chakma*





districts were also destroyed for cultivation purposes. Many of these reclaimed cultivable areas across the region are still seen dotted with the roots of large trees. Coupled with the severe shortage of cultivable land in the region, the rapid and sharp rise in its population has also seriously affected the forests of the region. The swollen population inevitably took to destroying forest resources for their living.

The onslaught on the forests intensified as a section of forest department officials allowed the people to fell trees and take away other resources in exchange for alleged financial grafts on the one hand, while profit-mongering traders induced the local poor people, both tribal and non-tribal, to extract more and more timber for them on the other.

The phenomenal improvement in the transport system across the whole region, even into the most dense jungles and forests, has accelerated the depletion of forest resources. Thus the process of destroying the forest resources has been going almost unabated since the commissioning of the Kaptai dam. A number of camps and outposts created for law enforcing agencies across the region, construction of more and more roads for them and the increasing reclamation of open land on account of security over the past have also added to the onslaught.

Balukhali union is situated on the east of the Karnaphuli flowing by the east of the present Rangamati town. Nripati Ranjan Tripura said: "Before the dam was constructed and we were rendered homeless, this village, where we now live, was a dense jungle. Our original village is now in the midst of the river where you can see some reefs when the water level falls. The course of the river changed due to the dam and it swallowed those hills and our houses situated at the base of the hills."

Nripati Ranjan said those jungles where their village was located had many gigantic trees. They had to fell all those trees to build their houses there.

"But at present there are few trees left around," he added. "And if we now need timber, say for building new houses, we have to go much deeper into the hills, even upto eight to ten km into



the interior, to find a big tree. Big trees have become very scarce even in the dense forests these days."

The part of Baghaichari thana where Mukunda Lal Chakma and his fellow villagers resettled was also a thick jungle. It was so dense that one could easily step from one branch of a tree onto a branch of another tree 'like the Tarzan'. He said that one even did not dare then to venture into the jungles alone. They cleared a large portion of those jungles to raise their houses as well as reclaim land for cultivation.

Mukunda Lal Chakma retorted: "The government then did not tell us not to destroy forests. Even if we were told so, where else could we have gone? If we had not cleared the jungle and felled the trees where could we have settled?"

"We did not come here of our own will, let alone destroy the forest. Had we not been rendered homeless by the dam we would not have come here at all.

Omar Ali said after they had migrated to that place, displaced by the dam, they had to toil very hard for four to five years.

"We had to start from scratch", Omar Ali said. "This was a thick forest and we had to carve out land from this jungle for both cultivation and building houses. So, we had no option but to fell the trees".

Pointing at the Rangamti - Chittagong road, he added: "This road was not there then. Even the narrow waling trails were few and far between here. We could only travel to Chittagong then by launches along the Karnaphuli."

The family of Muktalata Chakma, (81), now lives in Ugalchari village, located on the west bank of the Chenghi river in Paanchari thana of Khagrachari district.

She said: "Yes, before we came there were human habitations here. But most of the plain land was covered by forests. We had to fell trees and clear jungles to take out land for cultivation. We had no other alternative".



Koyapara village, built on a few hill-tops, is about 25 km north of Bandarban town. Meraji Karbari lives in this village. As part of a 10-family refugee caravan, forced out of their ancestral villages, his family came to this area in search of a suitable place for resettlement. They set up this village and named it Koyapara. The hills in the locality then were covered by dense foliage, shrubberies and thick jungles. There was not even a foot-trail up the hills. The Chandraghona - Bandarban road was about five km east of this area.

Meraji remembered: "Before the dam was set up we lived in Dighalchari village. It was situated about six km upstream north-east of the dam point. As the water began to swallow our land and houses, a group of people, mainly from our Tangchangya tribe, set out in search of new place in this direction. Our family, however, did not follow them. First, we went up a nearby hill. Its base was surrounded by flood water. For one year we lived on that hill. After the water receded we too left for this locality.

Meraji said their group destroyed a part of the forest to reclaim land to build their houses. The small patches of plain land down the hills were also covered by jungle which they cleared to make the land suitable for farming. But the land they reclaimed here was much less than the land they had in Dighalchari, he added.

"We are so unfortunate", Meraji Karbari sighed. "None is there to protect us, to look after our interests. We have been living in this place for almost thirty six years. Now we hear that this area will be leased out for rubber plantation. We are afraid that we may again be rendered refugees!"

### ***FUEL WOOD TOO COMES FROM FORESTS***

Prior to the construction of the Kaptai dam, the government promised that every household would be provided with power because it was their land on which the facilities would be set up. Although the power generated by the dam has illuminated many towns and cities, the villages where the affected people now live are still as dark as they were before. Kerosine lanterns are still the source of their light at night while their fuel wood come from the forests.



Shankhamala Chakma said: "The dam and the water of the lake have rendered us homeless, have taken away our land. It now generates electricity, but we are not entitled to this fruit. Nor is there pure drinking water for us. We do not have even enough roads for movement".

She said there were 64 families in their village. The jungle serves as the main source of their living. They clear the jungles on the hills for Jhum cultivation, collect bamboos, timber and wood from the forests to sell. They procure fuelwood from the forests for their own use too.

Padarani Chakma, (24), a housewife of the same locality, said they also used the wood from jungles as fuel for cooking. They procured fuelwood from their own plantation too. She said in their locality, the male members of the family felled the trees and the female members chopped and took them to houses by boats.

Kalpana Tripura, (50), of Balukhali village said they also used chopped wood as fuel for their cooking. They depend on the nearby reserve forest for this purpose. She said they also collected timber and wood from the forest to sell. Her husband, Ananda Tripura, collects wood and timber and carries them by boat to Rangamati for sale.

About ninety per cent of the families in Rangamati town, where government and forest department officials also live, use wood as fuel for cooking purposes. But nobody raises any question about the source from where the wood comes.

Nakyabi Chakma said her family burned both bamboos and collected wood from the forest as fuel. But they buy them from the vendors who bring them to nearby selling points at the river ghats by boat. She said villagers from different areas peddled the wood.

Before the dam was set up nobody sold or bought wood as fuel. They only collected them from nearby foliages and jungles for their own use, Nakyabi said.



## **POLLUTION HITS KAPTAI LAKE**

The Kaptai lake is becoming increasingly polluted for various reasons. Contamination by chemical fertilisers and pesticides that are used in the adjacent crop fields, the flow of human wastes into the lake, other wastes carried down by rain water as well as the dumping of animal carcasses are the main problems.

A survey carried out by the Rangamati District Health Department reveals that more than five tons of human excrement and other wastes flow into the lake every day.

According to estimates, a staggering 85 per cent of the total population living around the lake depend on its water for critical household necessities such as drinking, cooking and cleaning. The inhabitants of villages and localities, where there are no tubewells, dig kutchha wells or just holes to procure drinking water that originates from the lake. The water supply for Rangamati town also depends on the lake.

A study conducted by the Chittagong Division Department of Environment to analyse the presence of different germs in the drinking water, shows that every 100 ml of the lake water contains 7500 units of Cauliform bacteria. The study also shows that every 100 ml of drinking water supplied by the Public Health Engineering Department for Rangamati town's people contains between 20 and 304 Cauliform bacteria.

Dr. Supriya Barua, Civil Surgeon of Rangamati, said only two Cauliform bacteria per 100 ml of water were acceptable for consumption according to Bangladeshi standards. Intake of water containing this virus may cause diseases such as diarrhoea, Kalaazar and jaundice. The Kaptai lake water also carries malaria germs.

## **BIG FISH IN LAKE DWINDLES**

Although no fish cultivation was undertaken in the Kaptai lake during the early years, there has been a natural fish population since its emergence.



Meanwhile, many people who had been displaced by the dam and later settled near the lake, resorted to fishing in this lake as a way of living. And, as the fishing went on in rather a reckless manner, big fishes began to dwindle.

But another reason added to the depletion of the lake's big fish population.

The Manager of Kaptai Lake Project, Rafiqul Islam Chowdhury, who is a Fisheries Department Officer, said: "After the lake had emerged and had taken its permanent shape, many kinds of fish bred there in a natural process. The gradual concentration of a large fish population into the lake and its suitability for planned fish culture led the authorities to undertake large-scale fish cultivation there.

He said, "Currently, every year huge quantities of Ruhi and similar big fish fry are released into the lake. But a large portion of the fry does not get the chance to mature to its optimum size because they are eaten by rakhash (predator) fishes and heavily fished by fishermen with 'current' nets."

During 1983-84, a large part of the lake, divided into many sections by nets, was leased out to private sector for cultivation of *Telapia* and similar types of fish. According to Rafiqul Islam, it was a wrong decision as *Telapia* is a kind of rakhash fish which swallows other fishes or their fry.

He said another obstacle to Ruhi cultivation was the lake's depth. The optimum depth of the water for fishes of the Ruhi species should be four to five metres. But the average depth of the lake is above 11 metres, which increases further during the rains.

Another hazard that has affected the fish population is the increasing use of chemical fertiliser and pesticides in the cropfields around the lake. A lot of fish fry die due to contamination of lake water by harmful chemicals which flow into the lake.

According to statistics provided by the Rangamati Sub-Office of the Fisheries Research Institute, during 1965-66, the share of Ruhi, Katla, Mrigel, Kalibaus and other big fishes in the



total fish population of the lake was 78 per cent. In 1993, the share reduced to a meagre 2.36 per cent. Of this 2.36 per cent, Ruhi constituted 0.51 per cent, Katla 0.78 per cent, Mrigel 0.29 per cent, Kalibaus 0.72 per cent and the others 0.5 per cent.

On the other hand, in 1992-93, Telapia's share went up to 19.55 per cent. Among the small types, kanchki's share stood at 17.92 per cent and Chapila's at 32.30 per cent.

### **WILD LIFE ON DECLINE, CATTLE ON THE WANE**

Due to the stripping of the natural reserve forests following the implementation of the Project and the resettlement of the mainlander Bengali population in the region, the wildlife was seriously affected. As their sanctuaries were increasingly subjected to depletion, the number of various wild animals that roamed the dense jungles of the region registered a gradual decline.

Baradananda Chakma said the hills around the lake where people now live and grow fruits or other crops were full of natural forests. People seldom dared to venture into those thick and dark woodlands for fear of wild beasts. Those animals were seldom seen in the region these days, he said.

The area of the present Rangamati town where the densely populated 'Reserve Bazar' is located was once a deep jungle and part of it was a government reserve forest. It was turned into a human habitation following the emergence of the Kaptai lake that swallowed a vast number of homesteads. Reserve Bazar was developed in the process.<sup>8</sup>

The wild beasts which once freely roamed these hilly jungles including elephants, sambar, monkeys, wild boars, wild dogs, black leopards, Royal Bengal Tigers, rhinoceros, gayal etc. There were also many species of birds and reptiles. Most of these animals and beasts are now extinct.

Another major casualty of the dam is the livestock population. With the emergence of the lake not only a vast tract of exclusive grazing field went under the water, but also most of





*Shankamala Chakma*



*Muktalata Chakma*

*Abul Kashem*



*Kalpana Chakma*





the remaining grazing field near the project site was converted into farm land.

As a result, most farming families now cannot keep more than a pair of cattlehead each, the bare minimum for operating a plough to till the land.

Mukunda Lal Chakma said they had more than 100 cows and bullocks before the dam was set up. Now their herd consists only of seven cows and no bullocks. "We employed three to four cowhands to maintain our cattle herd then," he said. "But that seems like a dream now."

Added Mukunda Lal Chakma: "There is now little land left for the cattle to roam. So, we keep only the few which are necessary for cultivating the little land we have."

He said they often had to flee their homes for safe sanctuaries when the government forces and the Shantibahini members fought. As a large herd of cattle becomes an obstacle to a swift flight to safety, they maintain as few cattlehead as possible.

Muktalata Chakma, (50), of Ugalchari village of Paanchari thana under Khagrachari district said her family, after coming to this village, kept on rearing cattle. But when they were forced to leave their home for India as fighting broke out between soldiers and Shantibahini they had to leave their herd of cows and goats behind. On return from exile in India, they found out that all their cattlehead were lost and now they till their land with a spade.

A similar story was told by Modhumangal Karbari: "What's the logic of putting in so much of hard work and time to raise a herd of cows and goats as you have to live in the midst of fear of flight from your home any time?"

He said his family lived in India as refugees from 1986 to 1988. Whatever cattlehead they had owned before that were lost during their journey to India. There was not much land available for grazing anyway, he said.

Baradananda Chakma has now only one cow. Before the dam was installed, his family owned quite a large herd of cows,



bullocks and goats, he said. Due to a lack of adequate grazing space it was not possible to keep many cattle he said, and they had no real need for cattle because they had no cultivable land.

Nripati Ranjan Tripura stated: "At the time when we lived in our old village, we had land for cultivation and, therefore, we naturally kept cattle to plough the land. Now as we have no land so we need no cows or bullocks."

### ***WATER: A SCARCE ITEM***

Safe drinking water is scarce throughout the region. Many areas still don't have working tubewells or ringwells for the dwellers to have potable water. A large number of sunken tubewells have been out of order for years. Villagers commonly complain that even if the tubewells are repaired by the government, it doesn't take long for them to break down again.

Junya Sen Karbari said only one tubewell was set up in their village and it had been inoperative for the last four years. As a result, the villagers had to either drink and use water from unhygienic ponds or wells. He complained that while the government health department asked people to use safe drinking water for protection from various diseases, it did not repair or replace the out-of-order tubewells in the various localities.

Pottepudi Chakma of the same locality said before her family was displaced from their village Vasanya Adam by the dam, they used water from a nearby fountain for household chores and depended on a well for drinking water. Still in their new settlement they use well water for both household chores and drinking purposes. She also said a tubewell was installed in their locality long ago, but it had been lying idle for quite some time.

Modhumangal Karbari also complained of a lack of safe drinking water in their locality. He revealed that eight to nine years after they settled in the new locality, a tubewell was sunk, but it was operative only for a few years. The tubewell since then has been out of order. Meanwhile, the villagers commissioned a shallow tubewell, but it also lasted for only a



year. And now a single well, dug by the villagers, is their sole source of water for both household use and human consumption.

The people of Koyapara, a hilly village in Bandarban district, said they had no alternative but to drink and use water from a nearby fountain. In Dighalchari village, from where they were forced out by the dam, they drank well water. They said they knew impure water caused different diseases but they had no choice. They often suffered from intestinal diseases and Malaria occasionally. They said they suffered badly during the rainy season.

For most people of Mogban union in Rangamati Sadar thana, the nearby Karnaphuli is the only source for water needs.

Padarani Chakma, (24), a housewife of Golachari village of this union, said the villagers always used river water for both drinking and other household purposes. She did not know whether river water bred any disease. The villagers neither boiled the river water nor used purifying tablets before drinking it. Padarani said they were compelled to drink river water because there was no tubewell in their locality.

Water-bore diseases often break out in the village as well as other diseases. She said the nearest tubewell was about four km away in the local village market. It was practically impossible for them to fetch drinking water from that tubewell because of the distance.

Shibu Rani Chakma, (25), a housewife lives in Baradam village of the same union. Her husband Sudhakar Chakma, (38), is a teacher in a local school. She said they knew one should drink safe water for good health, but had to depend on river water for drinking and other purposes because there was no tubewell in their village.

Seema Tripura, (30), and Kalpana Tripura, (35), both housewives of Rajmoni Para village, use river water for household needs and depend on a nearby well for drinking water. The well was dug about one metre away from the river bank. They also could not ascertain whether the various



diseases which often broke out in their villages were caused by water or not.

They said there was a tubewell in the village, but it had been out of order for many years and the government had made no effort to repair it.

### **FOOD TURNS LUXURY**

Baradananda Chakma sounded both philosophical and sarcastic when he said: "Poverty changes life. It compels one to savour many unpleasant and unused-to things. So happy were those days!

"But now all those days seem like a dream. Those were the days when we did not have to put up with a scarcity of things. We had plenty of fish, meat, eggs, milk and what not.

"We did not have to buy anything, as we ourselves grew or made them. Our menu then contained at least four to five items. Fish and meat were common. Milk was so plentiful that sometimes we just got bored of having it!"

"And, now?"

"If I tell these things to the children of today they would not believe me."

He said in those days they did not know what poverty was like. They had three meals a day. But now it was difficult to manage even two square meals. They now skipped breakfast because they could not afford it! They now have to buy almost everything -- fish, meat, eggs, milk and vegetables which -- they can hardly afford to put on their menu.

Said Baradananda with a touch of pain in his voice: "I was a Headman for a long time -- from 1947 to 1972. Many of those people who came to my house to pay their taxes were treated with food if it was a mealtime. On average, three such guests were treated every day in my house."

"Meat?" exclaimed Milon Tripura of Balukhali. "How can we have meat when it is difficult to afford just two square meals



a day?" He said they never had to worry about their three meals a day before the dam displaced them. They often ate meat, eggs and milk.

"We have now almost forgotten the taste of these items," he said.

Shilabrata Tangchangya said: "There was a large kitchen garden adjacent to our house which was devoured by the lake. There was never any dearth of vegetables. We also had abundant poultry, cows and goats. I don't remember buying any fish for our meals. Meat was a regular item on our menu. But now we hardly eat fish or meat -- maybe once a month at the most."

He said there was little scope for his family to grow vegetables because they lived on a hill. Only potato and some fruits could be grown there only when Jhum cultivation was possible. For almost half the year they depend on wild potato for their vegetables needs and often they take mere chillis and salt with rice as their meal.

Modhumangal Karbari is, however, better-off than most. He owns cultivable land and his family can have vegetables in sufficient quantities to satisfy them. But they too do not have enough fish or meat on their menu as he cannot always afford them.

Modhumangal recollected that when they lived in Rangamati, they did not have to buy fish. They themselves caught fish in the river with nets. There was no dearth of cattle as there was plenty of land for them to graze on. They often ate chicken and eggs as they themselves grew them in abundance.

## **BOOST IN EDUCATION**

Although the dam disrupted the process of education for the children of the displaced people and those who continued to live near the dam site, the overall literacy rate among the tribal population of the region saw a significant upward trend following the launching of the Kaptai project. Especially, the Chakma tribe appeared to have advanced most in attaining education.



There are two lines of reasoning on the rise in literacy among the hill people. According to one group, the lack of available cultivable land prompted them to pursue education to have access to other types of employment. The second observation is that they already had an increasing interest in education before the work on dam was started.

Referring to the high rate of literacy in the area, Debashish Roy said some thought the dam had contributed to the literacy while others thought even if there was no dam the Chakmas would have been educated. "I think the second explanation is correct," he said.

Bhumitra Chakma, a teacher of International Relations at Dhaka University, in an article entitled 'Past, Present and Future of Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts', observed: "The Kaptai Dam had an enormous impact on the socio-economic and cultural life of the tribal people as well as on the environment of the region. The dam did seriously affect the education in the project area as there were no schools during the following 15 to 16 years. The people were also not in a position to send their children to school in towns or distant places."

Dr. Bhagadatta Khisa of Kalindipur area in Rangamati town viewed: "Before the dam was set up, people lived in sparsely situated houses. The number of schools was also low. Still children from far-flung areas came to schools. People were already attracted to education. But it is also true that after the dam was set up many schools were founded across the region and people took to education as a means of livelihood."

Rupak Khisa, a lecturer in History at Rangamati Women's College, said: "After the Kaptai Project was completed, Ayub Khan, then President of Pakistan, came to Rangamati to visit the area. He also went on a cruise in the Kaptai lake. From his observations, he realised that the means of livelihood were too limited for the tribal people. There was also little scope for building different industries in the region. Only widespread education could help them find their way out of that pitiful situation. So, he immediately passed an order to establish schools all over the region.



Bhumitra Chakma in his article, also endorsed the statement made by Rupak Khisa. He said in the article: "The government took up some steps in the 1960s to spread education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region in view of the low literacy rate there. A special mechanism styled as the 'Development Committee' was set up with the Chittagong Divisional Commissioner as its chairman, for a need- assessment study for development of the region. The committee found out that out of a total of 161 primary schools earlier set up across the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region, only 122 were functioning. It suggested that the region needed 724 more primary schools. But only 169 more primary schools were established and in 1966 the total number of the primary schools stood at 391. Out of them, three were exclusively for girls while the rest offered co-education.

### ***HEALTH CARE, FAMILY PLANNING***

One of the most serious problems resettled people now face is transport difficulties. Boats are now the sole means of their transportation even if it means just going from one village to another. It takes three to four hours for them to reach Rangamati town by boat.

As a result, doctors often refuse to visit the patients living in the hills even when there is an outbreak of a major disease. So, someone goes to the doctor, describes the symptoms of the patient's disease to him and on that basis receives medicines.

However, the family planning field workers often visit their clients in these hilly habitations and provide them with birth control measures. It is interesting that most tribal couples in the region are well aware of the importance of family planning. It is either because of poverty or the result of a successful motivational campaign carried out by the family planning department.

It was found women took the lead in adopting birth control measures. They have little reservation about any kind of contraceptive method.

Goutam Dewan, who is currently a vice-president of the Family Planning Association of Bangladesh (FPAB), said: "There is no





*Weaving is one of the traditional trades of the Chakmas.*



taboo or superstition against birth control in our society. These indigenous people even in old times took to natural way of checking birth while they use modern methods today."

Seema Tripura, (26), of Rajmoni Para village said family planning workers visited their houses and the villagers were also interested in family planning. When asked if her husband approved of her taking contraceptives she replied: "If he does not support it how can I take it?"

"Do you take pills?"

"No, I take injectables?"

"You must have been aware that there are quite a few other contraceptive methods available? Why have you gone for injectable among those?"

"Well, injectables have few side-effects and are quite convenient to use. For a while I also used the pill but it did not suit me. So, my husband suggested injectables and I complied."

Seema was married to Pradip Kumar Tripura seven years ago. They have a son, aged four years, and an eleven-month old daughter. She said there were no recreational facilities in their village. However, they occasionally went to Rangamati town to enjoy movies.

They did not mull over the political condition of the country, she added. They did not know even the names of the President, Prime Minister or of any other national leaders of the country for that matter.

But both the parents foster an ambition. They will do everything possible within their limits to give their children the highest possible education.

Kalpana Tripura of the same village has been married for five years. She has a three year old son. She and her husband also wish that their son will go to school, then to college and then even to university.



She, in consultation with her husband, takes injectables for birth control. She said her main motivation behind adoption of birth control measure was to keep the family size small so that they could groom their son properly.

"If we have many children then we won't be able to give them sufficient food and send hem to school," she observed.

Padarani Chakma, however, does not practise birth control measures. She has two daughters, one five years old and the other two and a half.

"So, why don't you go for contraception? Is it because you are still trying for a son or is it because your husband objects to birth control?"

"No, nothing like that. We just still don't feel like having it. My husband has not said anything against it."

Her husband's family, including her father and mother in-law, do not object to birth control. Her two sisters in-law (wives of her husband's brothers) underwent ligation a few years ago, Padarani said.

Pottepudi Chakma said: "When I was young no family planning workers visited us then. But now quite frequently they come to visit the young women.

"My own daughter in-law is a user of contraceptives."

She said her family, including herself, did not mind her daughter-in-law using birth control.

Chitra Rekha Tangchangya, (59), of Rajasthali thana also gave a similar view: "You know, poverty was not so widespread in those days. Therefore, people did not bother much about family planning."

She added: "But time has changed. There are many poor families around these days. So, now we have to think about the size of our families. If we keep the family small, it is good for us."



## **FRUIT FARMING SUCCEEDS ONLY TO FAIL**

The government took up a scheme in 1968-69 to rehabilitate a total of 11,000 families in an area of 66,000 acres under 51 moujas around the Kaptai Lake. According to the scheme, they were rehabilitated in the proposed area, each family was provided with six acres on average for fruit cultivation on a priority basis. Each family was also given cash money, saplings of various fruits, fertilisers and pesticides worth Tk.5500 to develop a model fruit farm over a two-year period.

In the process of implementation of the scheme, extensive fruit cultivation took place in the area. Initially the success was quite impressive in terms of yields. But the farmers were soon disillusioned as they could not reap the final benefit, the commensurate financial return for their produces.

This was mainly because no marketing mechanism was developed by the authorities, no preserving or processing facilities were built, and particularly, because of a lack of transportation facilities preventing their produces reaching major selling points or towns where they had a good demand. In the absence of any cold storage or other preservation facilities, the fruit farmers are very vulnerable to middlemen who offer them low prices. Under the scheme, mainly jackfruit, mango, pineapple, lemon, guava, papaya and bananas are cultivated.

Shankhamala Chakma developed a garden of mango, jackfruit, pineapple and lemon trees on her six acre plot on a hill. She does not think she receives fair prices for her harvests, rather, they are pitifully low. She said they had to work to their bones to ensure maximum possible yields of fruit crops, especially as the productive power of the land had decreased. They are now alarmed at the ever-decreasing output over the past few years. She said, she got only Tk.200 to Tk.300 per 100 jackfruits, Tk.75 to 100 for 100 pineapples and Tk.25 to Tk 30 for 100 lemons.

Ananga Mohan Chakma was given 10 acres of hill as compensation. He planted trees for timber in addition to raising a fruit plantation on his land. Ananga Mohan complained that the prices they received for their fruits were



very low. He usually does not make spot-sales but takes the harvests to Rangamati town. But little difference is achieved. He said they were at the mercy of the middlemen. People these days seldom ventured for new fruit cultivation for these reasons, he added.

Shukra Moni Chakma, (75), is from Rangapani village on the outskirts of the Rangamati municipal area. He blamed lower land productivity for the decline in the income from his family's fruit plantations. He said the money he earned by selling fruit in the early days was not that disappointing. But now the fertility of the land had drastically reduced resulting in smaller-sized fruits and lower total outputs. Every kind of fruit -- mango, jackfruit, pineapple - is becoming smaller in size every year. They are using increasing quantities of fertiliser to keep the size from falling further, but it has increased the cost of production and the business is incurring losses.

Some other growers of the same village said it was the middlemen who fixed the prices unilaterally. And since a racket of traders had established a monopoly, the growers had no other option but to sell their fruits to them. If anyone does not sell to them their crops rot in the garden.

## ***LIFE UNDERGOES TRANSFORMATION***

The life and culture of different nationalities of the region have undergone significant changes over a long period of time owing to several important factors.<sup>9</sup>

Their culture first underwent a phenomenal transformation under the influence of Buddhism. They were already in the process of giving up certain taboos, customs and rituals while adopting new values and rituals as the teachings of Lord Buddha spread. Introduction of modern education hastened the process of this transformation.

And then came the Kaptai dam which radically changed the lifestyle of the local population of the region. The changes can broadly be categorised into two dimensions: economic and cultural.



On economic plane the dam forced a major portion of the population to search for and eventually adopt completely new and hitherto-unpractised ways of livelihood against their traditional age-old agricultural way of life. They first came to learn that there were occupations other than cultivation to depend on for a living.

They were also faced with a totally new phenomenon in their life: migration. They were, in the process, compelled to accept and cope with quite unfamiliar and odd situations in which human beings may have to live. They also came to know about the real meaning of poverty and hardship. In the pursuit of adopting more and more new vocations, they took to education on a larger scale than before and started sending their children to towns and cities that offered institutions and facilities for better and higher education.

On the cultural dimension, over the past decades they have shed some of their traditional beliefs and superstitions, but still retain the others. The dam, by forcing them to scatter across a large unknown area and settle in newer surroundings, has also generated in them a new attitude towards life - that is, life is not a static or constant phenomenon rather a changing one. They came to learn that necessity often determines the ways of life.

In the course of their cultural transformation, the once widely practised ritual of sacrificing cattle and poultry on occasions such as marriage is seldom observed these days. Cattle were also earlier sacrificed to exorcise evil spirits, please gods or earn blessings from Heaven. These practices are on the wane. Doctors and modern medicines are increasingly taking the place of faith healers and witch-craft.

However, people of all strata of the society universally observe a social festival named 'Baishakhi' to mark the end of the old and the beginning of the new year. Farmers observe a ritual named 'Hal Palani' every year on the seventh day of the Bengali month of Ashar. They believe on this day the Mother Earth attains fertility and becomes able to grow crops. On this day, everyone refrain from working in the field, and do not go to work as a hired labour. They spend the whole day in jubilation.



Despite major changes in both the cultural and economic lives, the Raja is still the chief ruler of a tribe. A Headman is responsible for maintaining law, order and discipline in a Mouja. He still conducts local-level trials while a Karbari looks after a village. The indigenous people still hold their traditional leaders in high esteem and obey them. Any verdict or edict given by them is still inviolate.

Debashish Roy said: "Despite the prevalence of age-old value system our society, as it is dynamic, is changing."

Referring to the loyalty to the King, he said: "loyalty varies from individual to individual. Everything is mutable."

### **HOW HARD DAYS ARE SAILED THROUGH**

How do the displaced tribal people survive when they are in need of extra money, say for example, when a sudden illness of a family member calls for a substantial amount of cash?

Well, they have to go to money lenders or to their principals (in the case of those who sell timber, fruits or other things to middlemen/traders on a regular basis). But loans are not readily available when needed, nor are the incidences of borrowing among the indigenous people frequent. Also, the money borrowed usually is usually a small amount. However, some mortgage gold ornaments or land for loans. Some people who raise fruit plantations take advances from their principals.

Baradananda Chakma said loans were not easily available in the villages. If the necessity was pressing enough they went to the town to sell their land to rich people. In emergency cases, some of those who owned gold ornaments borrowed money against them. Usually the borrowers worked harder and cut expenses to save money to be able to repay the loans. Those who sold wood and timber took credit or advances from their principals.

Baradananda added, the villagers faced economic hardships during the Bangla months of Falgun, Chaitra and Baishakh because it was the lean season in terms of harvesting or fishing or any other gainful employment. During this time



those who owned fruit plantations and caught fish to sell took advances from those to whom they sold their produces.

"But, it is not easy to repay loans because you have to save the money for repayments after meeting the daily needs of your family" Baradananda said. He said loans exceeding Tk. 1000 were not usually available from neighbours in the village. So, in such cases they had to manage it from town or elsewhere.

Nripati Ranjan Tripura also told a similar story in this regard.

"Who gives loan to whom?" he commented. "Pure, interest-free loans can seldom be had from co-villagers or neighbours."

He said in most cases, villagers who live on selling this or that to middlemen or traders took advances from them. Many of them repaid the loan not in cash, but with the items they sold to them. These included bamboos, fish, trees etc.

An account given by Shilabrata Tangchangya is more enlightening. He said besides taking advances against trading items such as bamboos, trees or paddy, poor agricultural daylabourers sold their labour to landlords in advance at lower -than-normal rates.

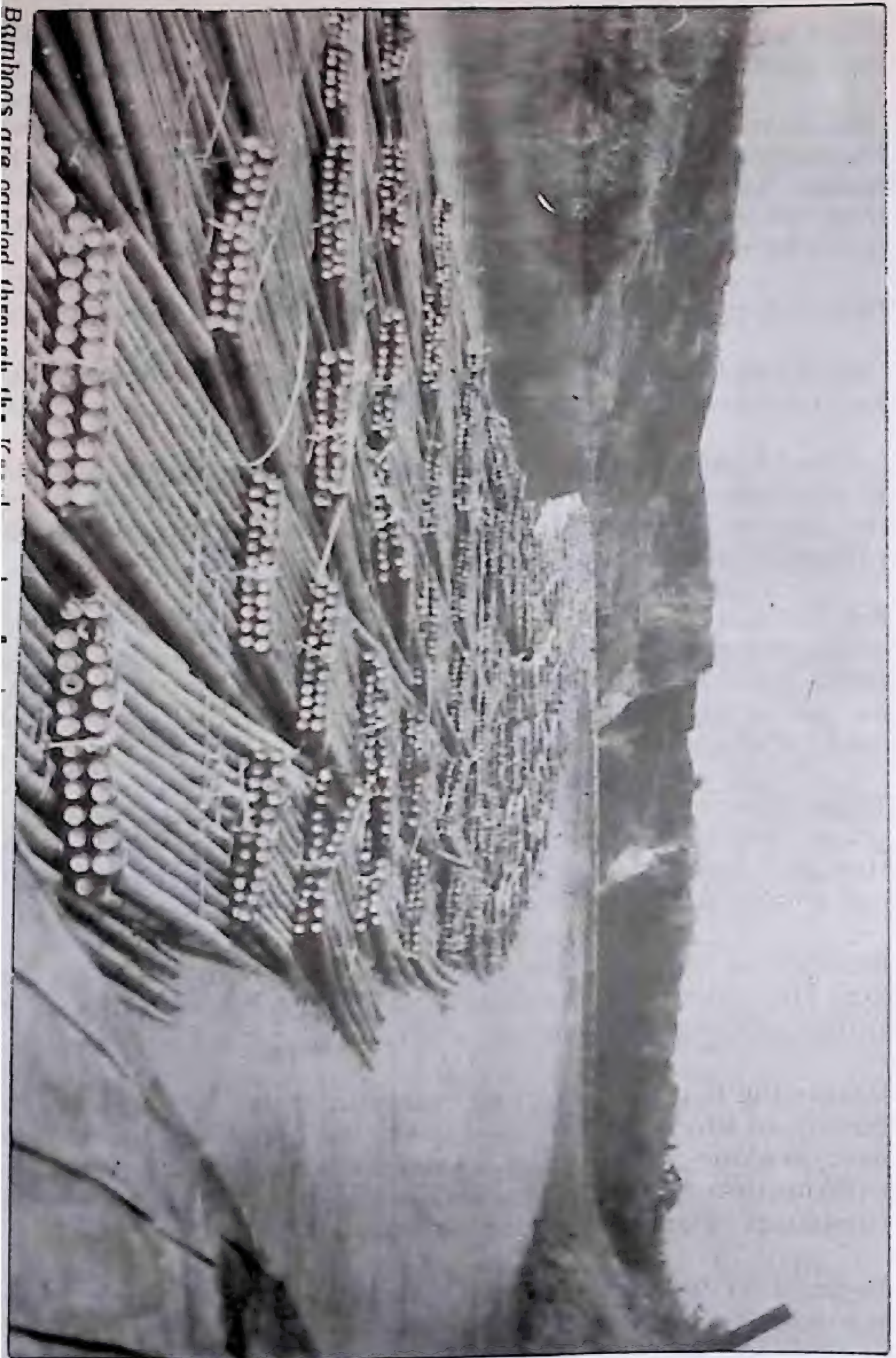
Those who repaid the loans in kind also had to accept lower prices than normal for the commodities or items with which they paid back the loans. He said, for an advance of Tk 1000, one usually paid 350 seers of paddy.

Shilabarata said large amount of money could not be had as loan straightway. The man in need had to sell land or valuable things at lower than normal prices.

Borrowing is not an exclusive domain of the men, women do borrow at times. But in their case, the loans are taken from women alone and the amount is relatively small. Usually, the information about their borrowing is hidden from their husbands or senior male members of the family.

Padarani Chakma said: "Women, take loans from other women. We not only borrow cash, we also borrow essential





Bamboos are carried through the river



items needed for family consumption from neighbouring families. Such items include rice, oil, salt, spices etc."

Although usually the loans are soon paid back, small quantities of things like turmeric or chillis are not considered as loans and these are not paid or taken back. But if it is salt, the borrower makes sure that it is paid back. The tribal people believe that if a loan of salt is not repaid then the family never gets rid of the curse of a continued spell of debt.

Kalpana Tripura occasionally borrows money from her neighbours or friends. She repays the money with the sale proceeds of the liquor she brews. She too gives loans to others. She said it was a two-way traffic. "It was an accepted and common practice among the rural women to borrow essential items such as rice, pulses or oil when a family runs short or unexpected guests pay a visit" she said.

## **WOMEN ARE EVERYWHERE**

The Chakma, the Tripura and the Tangchangys are male-dominated (patriarch) societies. Yet women have important places in the families because they contribute substantially to the economy of their families side by side with their male counterparts.

Women in the region work in crop fields and do other outside work in addition to household chores. They raise children, cook food for the family, rear poultry and cattle, collect water, plant paddy seedlings, weed the cropland, harvest crops and do the sowing in Jhum cultivation.

Moreover, female members of the very poor and needy families also venture, along with male members, into deep and remote jungles to collect bamboos and wood and fell trees to augment their income.

In these communities, the head of the family consults both senior male and female members before making important decisions. Although polygamy for male members is not prohibited, it is not encouraged either. Rather it is looked



Bamboos are carried through the Kasalong river for the Karnaphuli Paper Mills.





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In these communities, the head of the family consults both senior male and female members before making important decisions. Although polygamy for male members is not prohibited, it is not encouraged either. Rather it is looked



down upon as an abominable act. If a man marries more than one woman he is socially castigated and ostracised.

The young members of these communities hold their parents and the elders in high esteem and obey them.

But these societies also have their share of mavericks who deviate from their own tradition and culture. Although marriages are traditionally arranged by parents or guardians, there are increasing incidences these days of love marriages. Marriage between cousins is forbidden in Chakma, Tripura and Tangchangya culture.

Debashish Roy said women had always played an important role, in Jhum as well as fruit cultivation. The dam has contributed to some indirect changes in the role of women, he said.

Nakyabi Chakma said after her husband died she took the helm of the family and carried out the responsibilities of raising and supporting her five children. Her eldest son Dipak Brata Chakma is an employee of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC). Her second son Montu Chakma, after passing the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, joined the Bangladesh Navy while the youngest son recently obtained a diploma certificate in electrical engineering from the Sylhet Polytechnic Institute.

Her eldest daughter has been married for several years and the younger one is still a student. Nakyabi happily informed all her sons were obedient and respectful to her and they always consulted her before making any decision.

Seema Tripura believes a proper understanding between husband and wife is essential for a happy conjugal and family life. She said both her husband and she consulted each other before making any decision or doing anything important. Her husband always takes her into confidence and discusses with her what they should or could do for the welfare and progress of their family. Seema said: "If there is no mutual trust and respect between a husband and wife then there cannot be peace in the family."



There are still many joint families in the tribal societies. Chitra Rekha Tangchangya, (65), of Rajasthali is the mistress of such a joint family. Without any hesitation she said men alone did not run the family. Women were also part of it and played important role. Therefore, it was natural that the family should be run on the basis of joint understanding between the male and female members.

Sudatta Bikash Tangchangya, (44), the eldest son of Chitra Rekha, observed women played no less an important role than their male counterparts in running a family in the tribal societies. "They (womenfolk) work outside the house in the fields. It is a social tradition among us that women are consulted with and listened to while decisions are made," Sudatta said.

Women enjoy equal status as men do in the tribal societies of the region, particularly because of their substantial contribution to the economy of the family. While the uneducated tribal women work both within the household and in the fields in rural setting, the educated section undertakes jobs and other vocation in urban areas. Almost all tribal women from the hill districts with higher education are engaged in various professions in cities and towns. This has kept alive the tradition of almost equal status for tribal men and women in the educated and economically-advanced section of their societies.

Shankhamala Chakma said women in village began work very early in the morning to continue until, well into night. Before the dam was built, they did not go to the jungles to collect fuel wood as the various foliages and plants around their house met their fuel requirement. People did not buy and sell wood for fuel then, they only worked the land to grow crops.

But now there is no land and no cultivation. So, to extend a helping hand to the men's struggle to earn a living, women now go to the jungles and collect fuel wood for sale. They even take the collection by boat to Rangamati to sell.

Shankhamala said: "Male members still usually have a nap after lunch but it is a luxury for us. We still do this or that at



that time. We usually stay engaged in weaving or knitting cloth for the family members."

Gautam Dewan said women were hardworking and they treated them almost equally.

He said: "By nature women are more active. Over the last thirty years there has been a change in their role but the their role in decision making continues."

Dewan said there were women Headmen and "they are tough administrators.

Padarani Chakma, (24), a housewife of Golachari village, has two daughters from her seven-year marriage.

She said: "The responsibility of taking care of children naturally lies with us. We do all the household chores. Rural women have to do practically almost all types of work."

The daily routine of Padarani runs as follows:

She gets up from bed while it is still dark and dusts and sweeps the yard and the rooms of the house. Then washes all stale utensils and dishes from the night before at the nearby river. Once these chores are completed, she fetches water for cooking, cleaning and drinking from the river. She then cooks and feeds her daughters.

If it is a farming season, she goes to work in the field where she weeds out grass and plants shoulder to shoulder with the men. She also plants seedlings and collects fuel wood from the jungles. Usually the male members of the family fell and chop trees while the female members bring them home by boat. This is the normal schedule up to lunch time.

Between 12:30 and 1:00 p.m. she is back home, washes clothes and has her bath. Then she serves lunch for the family. She also takes a meal with them. The lunch over, she knils and sews clothes for about one-and-a-half hours. Again she goes to work in the crop field and continues until the sun sets.



On returning home, she washes herself and her daughters. Then she cooks the supper. After the night meal is over, which she serves, she takes the kids to bed, and often tells stories until they are asleep.

"Do you have any pastime, or when and what do you do for your recreation?" "Well," she paused for a while and said: "No, I don't have any. But sometimes we go to Rangamati town to watch movies when we can manage time and money. She hastened to remind that they had to go by hired boat to Rangamati for this purpose.

After such an arduous day does her body remain fit to satisfy her husband's need?

"Oh!" her face reddens at this question but answers: "Anyway, it has become a habit and we are used to it this way. But he (husband) is understanding and does not insist if I don't feel like having it."

The daily schedule of Padarani Chakma is no exception in the region. It is a typical routine with only a little variation for all the women in the tribal societies.

As Shibu Rani Chakma, (25), a housewife of Boradam village with three children, said there was no 'head or tail' of the work of the village women. They had to do everything including: planting seedlings in the field, chopping wood, cleaning and washing and fetching water from the river or tubewells.

These are all in addition to their normal household chores such as cooking, maintaining the house, rearing the children, and cleaning and washing. They also have to go to the market to buy necessities or sell things such as fuel wood or handicraft.

Shibu Rani has a dream: Her children will be educated.

But only God knows how far we shall be able to afford, she added. Shibu Rani's husband, Sudhakar Chakma, is a teacher at a local public school. She enjoyed a lot of personal freedom in her life, she said.



## **PROTESTS EVOLVE INTO REBELLION**

The people of the region could never reconcile to the untold sufferings caused by the construction of the Kaptai dam. Although there was no immediate protest but the silent exodus of nearly 40,000 people from their motherland into an alien and humiliating life in a foreign country was indeed a manifestation of their undefined protest. On the other hand, those who did not leave and resettled in different parts of the region eventually came to a solid conclusion that they had suffered a serious injustice. A strong feeling of grievance and protest gradually took over the minds of particularly the more educated members of the local population.

Meanwhile, with their political consciousness increasing, mainly due to the spread of education, the feeling of being wronged crystallised very firmly in their psyche. They came to regard the dam as a death-trap.

Apart from the ordinary population, the Chakma Raja's family was also rendered homeless by the dam. So, the discontent did not remain confined to the general people alone, the highest stratum of the society was also disgruntled.

After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, when they were denied the status of a ethnic minority in the Constitution, they regarded it as a part of the ongoing process to destroy their individual cultural identity and were alarmed.

In the sixties, there was no political organisation in the region. The tribal population traditionally depended on their local elders, Headmen, Dewans and the Raja, for decisions on various important matters. They were not familiar with modern ways of expressing protest either, mainly because they did not feel the necessity of forming any political platform before that time.

The Chakma Raja Tridib Roy, East Pakistan Legislative Assembly Member Kamini Mohan Dewan and a few other regional leaders registered their protests against the Kaptai Dam from their respective positions. The protests were isolated and did not involve the general people and failed to stop the dam.



Manabendra Narayan Larma, regarded by the Chakmas a born fighter, also protested the construction of the dam in Kaptai. He was then a student but, did not want to do it alone. Rather he tried to involve the general people who were affected by the project. He went to them, explained the necessity of a protest against the dam. He even prepared booklets spelling out the disastrous consequences of the dam and tried to distribute them as widely as possible.

Binoy Kanti Khisa, a close friend and associate of Manabendra, remembered: "It was sometime in the year of 1963. The overall political situation of East Pakistan was stifled under the iron-rule of Ayub Khan. Public protest against the authorities was an impossible phenomenon then. Manab and some other young men, including me, were students in Chittagong living in a dormitory allotted for the tribal students. It was housed in a building called 'Bindu Niloy'.

"Manab was always concerned about the welfare of the tribal people. One day he said to me, the Kaptai dam has unjustly turned 100,000 people into homeless paupers. So, there must be strong efforts to make the tribal people, as well as the progressive section of the country, aware of the severe consequences of the project.

"According to his plan, he prepared a booklet mentioning the ill-effects of the dam. But every press we approached to get the booklet printed turned us down. However, after a long search a press in the Ghat Farhadbeg area named Abdullah Printing Press printed the material in secret. They were distributed too.

"During the time when the distribution of the booklet was going on, one afternoon Manab and I were lying on the same cot reading the Gitanjali of Tagore. All of a sudden, a group of policemen, stormed into our room. They arrested him and confiscated the remaining booklets that were kept in an iron trunk. Manab was taken to the thana along with the materials."

The following day, Manabendra Narayan Larma's younger brother Jyotirindra Narayan Larma nicknamed Santu Larma, and Binoy Kanti Khisa together tried to arrange bail for





*The residence of the Deputy Commissioner, Ranganath, faces erosion.*



Manabendra for the whole day. But the plea was turned down by the court.

When asked exactly what was written in the booklet, Binoy Khisa said: "It is now difficult for me to recall precisely. But I remember the title of the booklet. It was styled as 'Sharbanasha Kaptai Bundh' (The Disastrous Kaptai Dam). And the text included an account of the sad plight of the displaced people, the nature and extent of damages done by the dam and a call for protest against it."

Since then Manabendra Larma did not stop his crusade to safeguard the interests of the tribal people. He was elected a member of the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly in 1970 and after the emergence of Bangladesh became a member of the first Constituent Assembly of the country. He protested against identifying ethnic minorities as Bengalis in the Constitution. He formed an organisation called Parbatya Chattagram Janasanghati Samity (PCJSS) in a convention of tribal leaders held in Rangamati on 24 June, 1972. Tribal students from the Hill Tracts region also set up an organisation called the Pahari Chhatra Samity (Hill Students Association).

At first, both the PCJSS and the Hill Students Association launched the struggle for their rights in democratic and non-violent ways. But following the overthrow of the Mujib Government in 1975 when Martial Law was proclaimed, they went underground.

Manabendra Larma went into hiding and formed the Shantibahini, the armed wing of the PCJSS. But the exact date of the formation of the Shantibahini is not known. Reports say, the headquarters of the Shantibahini was originally set up in dense forest in Dighinala thana under Khagrachari district.

The Shantibahini started its armed activities in early 1976. Manabendra Larma, according to reports, succeeded in mobilizing a good number of people to join the ranks of Shantibahini and its present strength is claimed to be around seven thousand.



Against the backdrop of the spreading struggle for rights as individual ethnic minorities, the government started rehabilitating Bengalees, especially those rendered homeless by river erosion, from across the country into the region. The move was seen by the local people as a blow to their existence. It was also perceived as part of a government plan to resolve the population mosaic in the region by turning the tribals into a minority population in their own land.<sup>10</sup>

Although no official figure of the number of Bengali settlers is available, it is estimated that about 500,000 were resettled there. However, there have been allegations that the rehabilitated people were not actually given the land they were promised.

According to population census reports, the shares of tribals and Bengali people in the total population of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region were respectively, 97.5 per cent and 2.5 per cent in 1947, 91 per cent and 9 per cent in 1951, 88 per cent and 12 per cent in 1961, 84 per cent and 16 per cent in 1978 and 60 per cent and 40 per cent in 1981. Local leaders claim that the current ratio has become 50/50.

Gautam Dewan said Bengalis were here for ages. They were brought in for plain land cultivation. "But clashes with Bengalis began since 1975."

"We want our land back. It is a legal position on our part. The government could form a committee to settle the land issue," he said.

According to Raja Debashish Roy: "The Kaptai dam has, of course, left an indelible impact on the politics of the Chittagong Hill Tracts."

Charu Bikash Chakma, a senior political leader of the Rangamati region, dubbed the Kaptai dam as a 'political dam.'

He commented: "The Pakistan Government regarded us as pro-Indian and as a punishment they built the dam at Kaptai. If the real objective of the dam was power generation then it should have been set up in Bandarban. A dam in Bandarban



was the most plausible choice because that would have displaced no more than 10 to 12 thousand people.

"But what did they do? They established the dam in a locality which was densely populated with the largest area of the most fertile cultivable land in the region. Now, you tell me isn't it natural that the dam should have had grave political consequences?"

Goutam Dewan observed: "The impact of the Kaptai dam on the life of the tribal population and the overall environment of the region is still evident. Yes, we could have in course of time, forgotten the disastrous damages the dam has inflicted on our lives had the government not begun resettling mainlander Bengalees in this region."

According to Advocate Gyanendu Bikash Chakma, Kaptai dam is not the sole reason for political discontent in the region. It is just one of several reasons. However, he refrained from elaborating further.

According to many observers, the ordinary tribal people of the region are just innocent victims of a long-running volatile political situation which is not of their making. These ordinary people, who labour day-in and day-out for survival, do not even understand what politics is all about. But they understand enough to realise that they have been forced into their agonising plight for political reasons. They claimed they were quite often made victims of confrontations between the government forces and the Shantibahini.

Amar Jyoti Chakma of Mogban union said he was arrested and detained by government from April to May, 1978. The security personnel interrogated him for information on Shantibahini insurgents.

Amar Jyoti said: "I knew nothing about the Shantibahini or, for that matter, what they were fighting for nor did I know their whereabouts." So, he could not furnish any information about the rebels. But he failed to convince his captors.

Amar Jyoti Chakma said: "We are illiterate and ordinary people, we do not understand politics and we have nothing to



do with politics. It is a matter for those who are educated. Why should we suffer?"

Baradananda Chakma was also detained, along with others for two months and fifteen days in 1978. They were subjected to interrogation for information about Shantibahini.

"I still feel serious pain in my body at times," Baradananda said "For what offences we were tortured we do not know."

Mukunda Lal Chakma and some other fellow villagers were arrested in 1976. He said: "You see Shantibahini people are armed. If they demand financial donations then we have no choice but to comply. We have to think about our lives. So what is our fault? Those who have arms are the kings and they cannot be disobeyed."

His eldest son Danabir Chakma, (35), was also detained by the security forces in 1992 for 21 days.

"Our situation is like that in which kings fight each other while the innocent people get killed," Mukunda Lal despaired.

Punya Sen Karbari of the same village was held and detained for 19 days in 1981.

"We are ordinary folks," he said. "We do not have any link with the Shantibahini, nor do we support them. Why should we be blamed and punished for their activities?"

The families of Punya Sen and some other villagers remained hidden in the jungle for three months once.

Punya Sen complained: "When the Shantibahini and the Government soldiers are fighting we have no choice but to leave our homes behind."

The family of Muktalata Chakma, (82), now an inhabitant of Ugalchari village of Paanchari thana in Khagrachari district, lived in Burighat village of Naniarchar thana in Rangamati district before the dam was commissioned. The dam and the resultant lake forced her family out of their hereditary home in 1961 to migrate to their present locality. But a tragedy befell



their family because of the dam -- the dam tore it apart. The second son of Muktalata, Suniti Sadhan Chakma, left his motherland for India forever. However, Muktalata Chakma began a fresh life in Ugalchari village with her husband Jagat Chandra Chakma and two other sons and her grandchildren continued to live there. But a new tragedy was in store for them like hundreds of thousands of other tribal people. They were to be rendered refugees yet again.

The situation in the region continued to be tense since mid-70's. Meanwhile, military seized power in 1982 under General Ershad. At the beginning of 1986, the government of President Ershad announced general elections for May 7 of that year. The PCJSS, through a booklet entitled 'The Emergency Edict' on February 10, protested against the inclusion of the rehabilitated mainlander Bengali people on the region's voters' list and demanded the government removed them from the region and asked the local people to boycott the elections.

When a few rehabilitated Bengali leaders of the region began preparation to take part in the elections, Shantibahini members swooped on the Bengali-inhabited villages of Matiranga and Paanchari thanas. The rehabilitated people retaliated and made counter attacks on the tribal villages. As the situation turned from bad to worse and continued to remain volatile, tribal people, in thousands, began to flee their homes. Most of them crossed the border into the Tripura State of India and took shelter there as refugees. Those who did not leave for India moved deeper into the dense jungles and forests.

The family of Muktalata Chakma did not leave for India and took shelter in Logang area. They prepared themselves for a pitiful life there in the hope that soon the situation would become normal and they would be able to return to their houses.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the government and the PCJSS were initiated. But the peace move bogged down after six rounds of talks as the two sides failed to narrow their differences. This was when the government announced that the three hill districts - Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban - would each be run by its own local government



councils elected by the local people. The elections for the local government council posts were scheduled for June 25, 1989. But the PCJSS and its armed wing Shantibahini opposed the poll plan. The situation turned volatile again.

At this stage, the family of Muktalata Chakma was forced to migrate to India where they had the opportunity to have a reunion with the family's second son Suniti Sadhan Chakma in a refugee camp. Meanwhile, in a refugee camp Muktalata's husband Jagat Chandra, already a fragile old man, died after a prolonged illness. He was cremated there.

After the general elections in 1991 the elected government constituted a special committee on the Chittagong Hill Tracts region in a bid to arrive at a political solution with the tribal rebels. The first meeting between this special committee and the Janasanghati Samity was held on November 5, 1992. The peace process has been continuing since then and a ceasefire was successively renewed to allow a negotiated settlement of the crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Following an agreement between the government and the PCJSS, repatriation of tribal refugees from India began. The first batch of the refugees returned home on February 15, 1994.

Muktalata's family were among this first group to return but still minus a part of the family. The eldest son Prabhat Chandra Chakma and his wife and children failed to return with them. They were still in a refugee camp in India.

Said Muktalata in a pained voice: "You see, I am now an old woman, my life is almost lived out. I have lost my husband in an alien land. So, I do not bother about myself any more.

But, I can't stop worrying about my children and grandchildren. The grandchildren, at such tender ages, have already had the bitter taste of refugee life, have already experienced the sufferings of being evicted from own homes. I don't know how far they will suffer, how much more pain is still in store for them. And you know, the root cause of all these sufferings in that damned dam?"



Modhumangal Karbari said his house was burnt down twice: once in 1986 and again in 1989. On many occasions his family had to flee their home for life.

He recounted: "The first time was in 1986, when Bengalees swooped on our village and torched our houses we had to run away leaving everything behind. Hidden on the top of a nearby hill we looked on helplessly as our houses burnt to ashes."

Then they began their painful journey for sanctuary and came to a village named Dudukchari near the Indian border. But still they did not cross into the alien land for 'who wants to leave his motherland?' They remained in Dudukchari until 1988 and then made the journey back to Mirjibal, their village.

They built their houses afresh and began life anew. But peace was not in store for them. Just eight months after they had re-started their lives in their new house in the old village, in 1989, they were set afire again. But ironically, this time not by their nemesis, the Bengali settlers, rather by their own kinsmen, the Shantibahini people.

Not all those people who were rendered homeless by the armed conflicts between the Shantibahini and government forces, migrated to India. Many thousands of them, like Modhumangal Karbari, prepared for a refugee life in their own homeland. They took shelter in different parts across the region becoming exiles in their own homeland.

Earlier, after the process of their rehabilitation in the region began in 1987, the Bengali settlers began to encroach upon the land of the original tribal people. As a result, a long-running conflict over land between the tribals and the settlers began. The government forces and the Shantibahini also became entangled in this conflict. In 1979, widespread violence gripped a number of unions of Langdu thana. In the process, 2500 families were forced out of their homes.

Chandra Mohan Chakma, Headman of a Mouja in Baghaichari union, said many of those evicted people fled their villages into deep jungles leaving behind their property and belongings while some 500 families crossed into Mizoram State of India. Some others took shelter in the district headquarters.



One hundred of those 500 families which had left for Mizoram, later came back to their motherland, but none of them could regain their homes or property.

Chandra Mohan said the evicted people then filed a suit in the lower courts in 1985 to get back the possession of their homes and land. The court gave the verdict in their favour and a district official accompanied the evicted people to Langdu to establish them in their homes and land. But the official did not succeed in implementing the court decision and quickly returned.

Expressing grievances about these incidents, Din Mohan Karbari of Baghaichari village and Lakshmi Kumar Chakma, Headman of Nolua Mouja, said: "We are rendered exiles in our own homeland. We have homes and land but we are compelled to live the life of refugees."

Many such domestic refugees have even abandoned their original religion and converted to Christianity just for economic and other protections that accompany the conversion. Lakshmi Kumar Chakma himself has converted to the Christian faith.

Dipankar Talukdar, a former parliament member from the Rangamati constituency, said: "Those tribal people who have been evicted from their homes and have not migrated to India have been living the sub-human life of refugees in different parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Many of them are even resorting to various anti-social and criminal activities for survival."

According to Dipankar Talukdar, the overall social fabric of Rangamati town has undergone an unhealthy transformation following the eviction of the tribal people.

Dipankar Talukdar shot: "Can you imagine that many tribal girls and women have accepted the life of prostitution just to keep their bodies and soul together? You know, it was beyond our imagination before?"



## AN IF

When the Kaptai dam was constructed, most of the local people considered it a futile exercise. They thought the dam could not be sustained and it would be washed away the following monsoon when the invincible onrush of water rolled in from across the border and swelled the Karnaphuli. But time is a great teacher and in the course of the last 35 years, the once-upon-a-time simple tribal people have realised that the dam is not a human folly and it has indeed come to stay.

But, what if the dam was dismantled? A senior political leader of Rangamati region, Charu Bikash Chakma, said: "Even after a long period of 35 or 36 years the tribal people could not accept the dam. If the dam is really scrapped, I think their delight will know no bounds. This dam is a death-trap. If it is removed, the old cultivable land would be reclaimed and the crops that could be grown on these plots would solve our poverty."

This is not the feeling of Charu Bikash Chakma alone. Almost everyone in the region thinks that this dam is the root of all evils they have subsequently suffered.

Nripati Ranjan Tripura of Balukhali union said: "If the dam is dismantled we'll be able to till our land again and there will be no poverty. And if there is no poverty there will be no disturbance in the region."

Mukunda Lal Chakma also expressed the same view. He said: "This dam is the biggest evil in our life. If it is gone we shall get back our happy days."

Omar Ali exclaimed: "You say that! You ask if the dam is broken what we will do? We'll just rush back to our old land without the slightest delay."

Shilabrata Tangchangya became somewhat nostalgic and said: "I wish I could regain those young days of my life. I shall probably go mad with delight if the dam is really done away with. This dam, which I often went to visit curiously while under construction, has made our life miserable."



Modhumangal Karbari at first simply laughed away the proposition that the dam might be dismantled. But when pressed for his opinion if it really goes away, he replied: "People will just stream back to their dear old land."

Goutam Dewan was more pragmatic. He questioned: "Even if the dam is dismantled, what is the guarantee that the displaced people will get back their land as they were officially compensated for their loss of land and property, whatever the amount was?"



## Notes

1. Currently Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban districts of Bangladesh.

**Rangamati**, the biggest of the three hill districts, has an area of 6089 sq. km. The tribes of this district include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tangchangya, Lusai, Pankoo, Khiang and Murong.

Khagrachari is on the north of this district, while Bandarban on the south, Chittagong on the west and Mizoram State of India on the east. The district has 2318 sq. km of reserve forest and 2271 sq. km of unclassified forest.

The thanas of the district are Rangamati sadar, Kawkhali, Naniarchar, Langdu, Baghaichari, Barkal, Rajasthali, Bilaichari and Kaptai. It has 49 unions and 164 moujas.

**Khagrachari**, has an area of 2590 sq. km. with reserve forest spread over 103 sq. km and unclassified forest over 1094 sq. km.

Tripura State of India is on the north of the district, while Chittagong and Rangamati are on the south, Mizoram State of India on the east and Chittagong and Tripura State on the west.

The thanas of the district are Khagrachari sadar, Dighinala, Paanchari, Mahalchari, Matiranga, Manikchari, Ramgarh and Lakhmichari. It has 35 unions and 118 moujas.

The tribes of this district include Chakma, Marma and Tripura.

**Bandarban**, has an area of 4502 sq. km including 751 sq. km of reserve forest and 2125 sq. km of unclassified forest.

The thanas of the district are Bandarban sadar, Ruma, Roangchari, Thansi, Naikhangchari, Alikadam and Lama. It has 28 unions and 96 moujas.

Rangamati district is on the north of the district, while Myanmar is on the south and the east and Chittagong and Cox's Bazar are on the west.

The tribes of the district are Marma, Murong, Tripura, Tangchangya, Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khiang, Khumi, Lusai and Pankoo.

2. In Bangladesh there are, at least, 27 different tribes (Qureshi M.S. Tribal cultures in Bangladesh IBS Seminar, Vol 5, Rajshahi University, 1984). Different numbers are sometimes cited, for example, one European ethnographer C. Maloney, stated that there were 36 tribes. Such confusion is a result of sub-tribes being classified as separate tribes under different names.



The major ones are: Bom, Chakma, Khasi, Koch, Mandi (Garó), Mizo, Oraon, Pankho, Sak, Tangchangya, Brong, Hajong, Khyang, Lusai, Marma, Mru, Paharia, Rajbansi, Santal and Tripura.

They belong to six linguistic categories: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, or Mon-Khmer, and Tibeto-Burmese.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, there are 29 tribes. They are: Bangshi, Bawm, Buna, Chak, Coach, Garo, Hajong, Harijon, Khasia, Khyang, Khomi, Lushai, Mahatoo, Marma, Monipuri, Murang, Muro, Pahari, Pankoo, Rajbanshi, Rakhain, Saontal, Tangchanghya, Tipra, Tripura, Urang, and Uria. There are other tribes whom have been classified under the category of others and their number is 1,61,746.

The total tribal population stands at 1205978, according to the population census of 1991.

Chittagong division has the maximum number of these people- 687319, of whom the Chakmas have the highest number- 248321. The others are: Bawm (6978), Chak (2000), Garo (6859), Hajong (2325), Khasia (12280), Khyang (2345), Khomoi (1241), Lushai (662), Marma (150419), Monipuri (24902), Murang (22178), Muro (126), Pankoo (3227), Rakhain (13517), Saontal (10380), Tangchanghya (21057), Tipra (762), Tripura (77677), and Urang (3930).

(Statistical Pocketbook, 1994, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics)

3. It was the Chakma elite who about a century ago brought Bengali cultivators as sharecroppers into the Hill Tracts to plow and grow paddy on the flat lands. Thereafter, plow cultivation was taken up by the Chakmas themselves, and also by Moghs, Tipperas and Tangchangyas. Most of the Bengali features of plow cultivation have been taken over by the hillmen, and the same cropping cycle is followed as in the Chittagong plain. By the mid-1950's, out of 115,000 persons living around the future reservoir area (that is, out of slightly less than half of the total district population), 50,000 were classed as belonging to families supported primarily by plow cultivation; of the 80,000 persons in the reservoir area, 55 per cent were in plow-cultivating families. (David E. Sopher, *Population Dislocation in the Chittagong Hills*, The Geographical Review, American Geographical Society, Vol. LIII, No. 3, 1963.)
4. This notional boundary incorporating the CHT in East Bengal was unacceptable to the extremists of the Jana Samiti who soon came to be identified as the pro-Indian elements of the CHT. The pro-Indians led by Sneha Kumar Chakma refused to pay allegiance to Pakistan and unfurled the Indian flag



publicly and officially at the office of the Deputy Commissioner of the CHT at Rangamati on the morning of 15 August, 1947, which remained hoisted till 20 August, 1947. The pro-Indian faction of the Jana Samiti formed Protirodh (Resistance) Squads under the overall supervision of a Sangram (Action) Committee headed by Sneha Kumar Chakma to resist the installation of Pakistani administration. In an emotionally charged emergency meeting held on 19 August, 1947, the pro-Indian elements of the CHT called for an uprising and armed resistance against the Pakistani authorities. The meeting also adopted a resolution which amongst other things declared that 'the CHT shall not abide by the Radcliffe Award.' The futile resistance soon collapsed with the entry of the Baluch Regiment of the Pakistan Army which took control of the region and raised the Pakistani flag on 21 August, 1947. (Aftab Ahmed, *Ethnicity and Insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region: A Study of the Crisis of Political Integration in Bangladesh*, *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol 31, No. 3, 1993, London)

5. The Bangladesh government says it has no such information as to who from amongst the tribals left for India after 1960. On the issue of rehabilitation, it says the government (Pakistan) rehabilitated the families affected during the implementation of the Kaptai dam project. But if it is proved that certain families were not rehabilitated for any reason, the government (Bangladesh) will take steps for their rehabilitation (A Report on The Problems of the Chittagong Hill Tract and Bangladesh Responses for their solution, Special Affairs Division, Prime Minister's Office, Govt. of Bangladesh, 1993).
6. Summaries of options on file in the district field offices do not show precisely what the affected Chakmas decided to do or why. The files are, unavoidably, incomplete and do not distinguish Chakmas from others, unless each family's records are perused, an impractical procedure except for large groups of several dozen families such as the Bengali migrants to Kasalong. A major defect, for the purpose of this study, is the lack of distinction in the mawza totals between the options of plow cultivators and of jhumias.  
The data available refer to about 11,000 families of the 13,000 concerned. Between 800 and 1000 of these, depending on the set of data used, are known to be plainsmen and have, therefore, been eliminated from the computations wherever possible. For the remainder, the approximate distribution of choices among the four alternatives previously mentioned, without distinction between jhumia and plow cultivator, was as follows: (1) staying in the vicinity of reservoir, 52 per cent; (2)



moving to Kasalong, 29 per cent; (2b) moving to Chengri-Myani, 14 per cent; and (2c) moving elsewhere in district, 5 per cent. (ibid, 3)

7. Before the dam was constructed a thorough study of the area likely to be submerged by water, was made. But as the survey sheets, which were available, were not accurate and reliable, it misled the engineers. Therefore, after the dam was constructed and water held, it was found that about double the area was submerged than calculated.  
Moreover, after the lapse of a period of time, it was found that more of rich tropical forest were affected by capillary water and the area thus affected was considerable.  
Along the river valleys-Myni, Kasalong and Karnaphuli, a large tract of agricultural land was also submerged. The settlements of the tribal people, Chakma, Murung, Kokis, Tipras etc. were badly disturbed and they migrated to other places and resettled. (Prof. M. I. Chowdhury, Kaptai dam and Hydro-electricity, The Bangladesh Observer, May 27, 1974).
8. While reminiscing about the wild animals of the past, the old folks of Rangamati town almost invariably tell a tale. The story is as follows: One day a Royal Bengal Tiger was all of a sudden found roaming in the nearby areas of the newly-developed locality. People of the area ran helter skelter in fright. As the news of the tiger spread, a local braveman embarked on a hunt for the beast in a boat along the Karnaphuli. He finally found the tiger and shot it dead.  
What is interesting was that on hearing the news of the kill, the then Deputy Commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts District rushed to the spot. Then donning the dress of a hunter and with a gun on his shoulder, he got himself photographed with one of his legs resting on the dead beast.  
This tale is still told by the local old people in the region with a measure of sarcastic humour (as the funny behaviour of the DC) and of course with the sense of pride for the real hunter who belonged to them.
9. Apart from their traditional Jhum cultivation, the hillmen, both valley folk and ridge dwellers, have a number of traits in common. Among those distinguishing them clearly from the Bengalis are a predominantly Mongoloid physical type; bamboo house on poles with a raised platform for household work; keeping swine; brewing rice beer, cotton skirts with "tribal" patterns worn by women; sexual freedom before marriage. However, elements of plains' high culture are evident among the valley people. The Chakma language is related to Bengali, Chakmas and Tipperas have Bengali Hindu names,



Chakma and Moghs are Buddhists and have scripts of Arakanese derivation. Their elites have long modeled themselves on the Hindu Bengali and Buddhist Arakanese gentry of the plains; in the past they shared the disparaging attitude of the plainsmen towards the less civilized mountain folks to the east. At the same time, the Chakmas and other valley people want to hold themselves apart from the Bengalis, identifying themselves, with pride tinged with some humility, as pahari manush (hill men). (ibid, 3)

10. Although government initiative for this rehabilitation programme is officially denied, evidence exists that suggests otherwise. The contents of a confidential letter from the Commissioner of Chittagong Division to the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts District dated 4.9.1980, Ref. No.66(a) and of the confidential letter from the Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts District to his counterparts of the other districts dated 10.9.1980, Ref. No.1055(a) show that the resettlement programme was being carried out under government instructions. From the letters it can be ascertained that every Bengali family was promised five acres of high land, four acres of mixed land and 2.5 acres of paddy land if it migrated to Chittagong Hill Tracts region.
11. About the on-going negotiations, a Government of Bangladesh report says: "Immediately after coming to power in March, 1991 through popular vote, the democratically-elected Government of Bangladesh addressed itself to the solution of the long standing Chittagong Hill Tracts' problems and made policy statements expressing its keen desire to find out the much-needed political solution to those problems. While visiting India in May, 1992 the Hon'ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh availed of the opportunity of raising this important issue during the talks with the Indian P.M. and reached agreement for speedy repatriation of all Bangladeshi tribal refugees to Bangladesh in full safety and security. In this context, the Bangladesh side agreed to set up a representative political level committee that would encourage the refugees to return. The Indian side assured that its authorities would cooperate fully in the process of repatriation. A joint communique dated 28 May, 1992 was issued accordingly. In July 1992, the Government of Bangladesh appointed a 9-member (all members being Members of Parliament belonging to different political parties) Committee with Mr. Oli Ahmad, Bir Bikram, Communications Minister, as its head to look into the CHT issue, with the directive to submit recommendations in this regard.



The Committee soon started work in right earnest. It held meetings with cross section of people of the three Hill districts where it spent two days in each district. It exchanged views with the three Local Government chairmen (tribal) of the three Hill Districts' Councils. The chairman enjoys the rank and status of a Deputy Minister. It further exchanged views with the four members (all tribal) of parliament of the above districts. It held interviews and talks with more than 3000 inhabitants, representing various social segments, political and ethnic groups and Government servants of the Hill Districts of Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban. It also received their views in writing. This helped the committee in forming an impression and idea about the problems and their possible solutions. This set the stage for talks with the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS), the political front of the disgruntled section of the ethnic groups (mainly a segment of the Chakma tribe), of which the Shanti Bahini is the armed terrorist wing engaged in insurgent activities in Hill Districts. They are numbering only about five to seven thousand.

Consequently, the talks between the committee formed by the Government and PCJSS have so far been held in Khagrachari on 5-11-92, 26-12-92, 22-5-93, 14-7-93 and recently on 18-9-93.

During the dialogue the committee explained new administrative set-up, now in force under the Local Govt. Council Act, 1989 for the benefit and welfare of the tribal population of the three hill districts, Rangamati, Khagrachari and Banderban. The Act, 1989, in fact, provides for a number of legal safeguards in favour of the tribal population for preservation of their rights and culture and for the arbitration of social & tribal disputes etc. and has put into effect since July, 1989 in each of the three hill districts Local Govt. fully vested with administrative and financial power under the control and authority of the council dominated by tribal representatives. Some of the important features of the Act, may be stated here to illustrate its jurisdiction, power and authority:

- i. Each CHT district will be administrated by a council, named Local Government Council, which consists of one Chairman, who will always be a tribal and thirty other members of which two-thirds are tribal and one-third is non-tribal. The tribal seats are proportionately divided among different tribes of the districts.
- ii. The Council & the Chairman are directly elected on the basis of adult franchise.
- iii. The Deputy Commissioner of each hill district acts as the ex-officio secretary of the Council.



- iv. The Council is vested with the power & authority to decide on the question of transfer and settlement of land within the district.
- v. The Council has the power to levy taxes and raise tolls locally as per legal provision and schedule-2 of the Act.
- vi. The Council can appoint personnel for junior administrative posts and also frame rules for the administrative functioning of such personnel. It is also empowered to recruit police personnel upto the rank of Asst. Sub-Inspector within the district.
- vii. The Council will initiate resettlement and rehabilitation of landless tribals within the hill district.
- viii. Every year the Council makes its own budget with the fund, available from Govt. grant and its own resources indicating its income & expenditure and making provisions for promotional & developmental activities.
- ix. The Council has been vested with the authority under the law for the administration of 21 subjects (schedule-1 of the Act) ranging from the maintenance of law and order to such other activities as education, health care, agriculture & forestry, livestock, fishery, co-operative, trade & small scale industries, ferry, garden, parks, rest houses, water and sanitation, income generation projects etc.
- x. The Chakma chief of Rangamati, the Mong chief of Khagrachari and the Bomang chief of Bandarban have the right to attend the council meeting of the respective local Govt. either on their own or on invitation and to give their views on any issue discussed in the council meeting.
- xi. The chief, headman and karbari (all tribals) have been invested with certain judicial authority under the law for settlement of disputes.

During the dialogue-meetings the PCJSS submitted a revised 5 point demands with as many as 47 sub-demands and called for their fulfilment which to them would be the basis for solution of the CHT problem. Govt. of Bangladesh in the last meeting held on 18.9.93 with PCJSS gave its response to those demands stating that demands so made are in fact mostly covered by Local Govt. Council Act, 1989."

(A Report on The Problems of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Bangladesh Responses for their Solution, Special Affairs Division, Prime Minister's Office, The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1993)

*Following negotiations with the Committee, a truce has been enforced in the region. The last negotiations were, however, held on 12 July, 1995. The truce is extended on a monthly basis and observers say a settlement has become contingent*



upon the formation of the new government after the general elections due in early 1996.

The Shantibahini, during a meeting with the government on 17-18 December, 1987, placed its five-point demand. These are: regional autonomy for the CHT region, constitutional guarantee for the autonomy of the region, withdrawal of Bengalis who settled in the area after 17 August, 1947, allocation of fund in the central budget for the development of the area and creation of congenial atmosphere for solving the problems of the CHT region.

Since then, the Shantibahini has added other demands to the list. Important ones are: to give constitutional recognition to the 10 different tribal communities, framing of such constitutional provision so that persons coming from other areas of Bangladesh cannot settle, purchase and get settlement of land, to name CHT as Jumaland, to arrange honourable return and proper rehabilitation of those who were forced to leave for India after 1960, to take steps for the proper rehabilitation of all the members of Jana Sanghati Samity, and to demilitarise the administration of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

### **Glossary of terms used**

Taka	Main unit of Bangladesh currency. 1 US\$ equals about Taka 40
District	Administrative set up run by the civil servant called Deputy Commissioner. The country is divided into 64 administrative districts and all these districts are grouped into six divisions. A district is divided into thanas, which are police districts.
Union	Administrative unit below a district where Union Council is the elected local level self-government.
Mouja	A group of villages.
Raja	Literally meaning King, but for the tribal people it means the ruler.
Karbari	Village headman in the tribal area.
Shanti Bahini	Literally meaning peace force. Today, it refers to the army of the Chakmas fighting government forces in the CHT.
Sampan	A type of country boat.



## Annex-1

### Major features of the Kaptai dam

#### General

i. Catchment area	4250 sq.miles (11008 sq.km)
ii. Average Rainfall	100 inches (2540 m.m)
iii. Maximum Rainfall	141 inches (3581 m.m)
iv. Maximum Rainfall	62 inches (1575 m.m)
v. Average Annual Flow	12 M acre-ft (14804 m.cum)

#### Reservoir

i. Full Reservoir Level	109 Ft MSL (33.2 m)
ii. Max. Water Level	110 Ft MSL (33.5 m)
iii. Min. Water Level	66 Ft MSL (20.1 m)
iv. Capacity at 109' MSL	5.25 M. acre ft (6477 m.cu.m)
v. Dead Storage at 76' MSL	1.18 M. acre ft (1456 m.cu.m)
vi. Flood absorption	0.83 M. acre ft (1024 m.cu.m)
vii. Area at 109' MSL	300 sq.miles (777 sq.km)

#### Main Dam

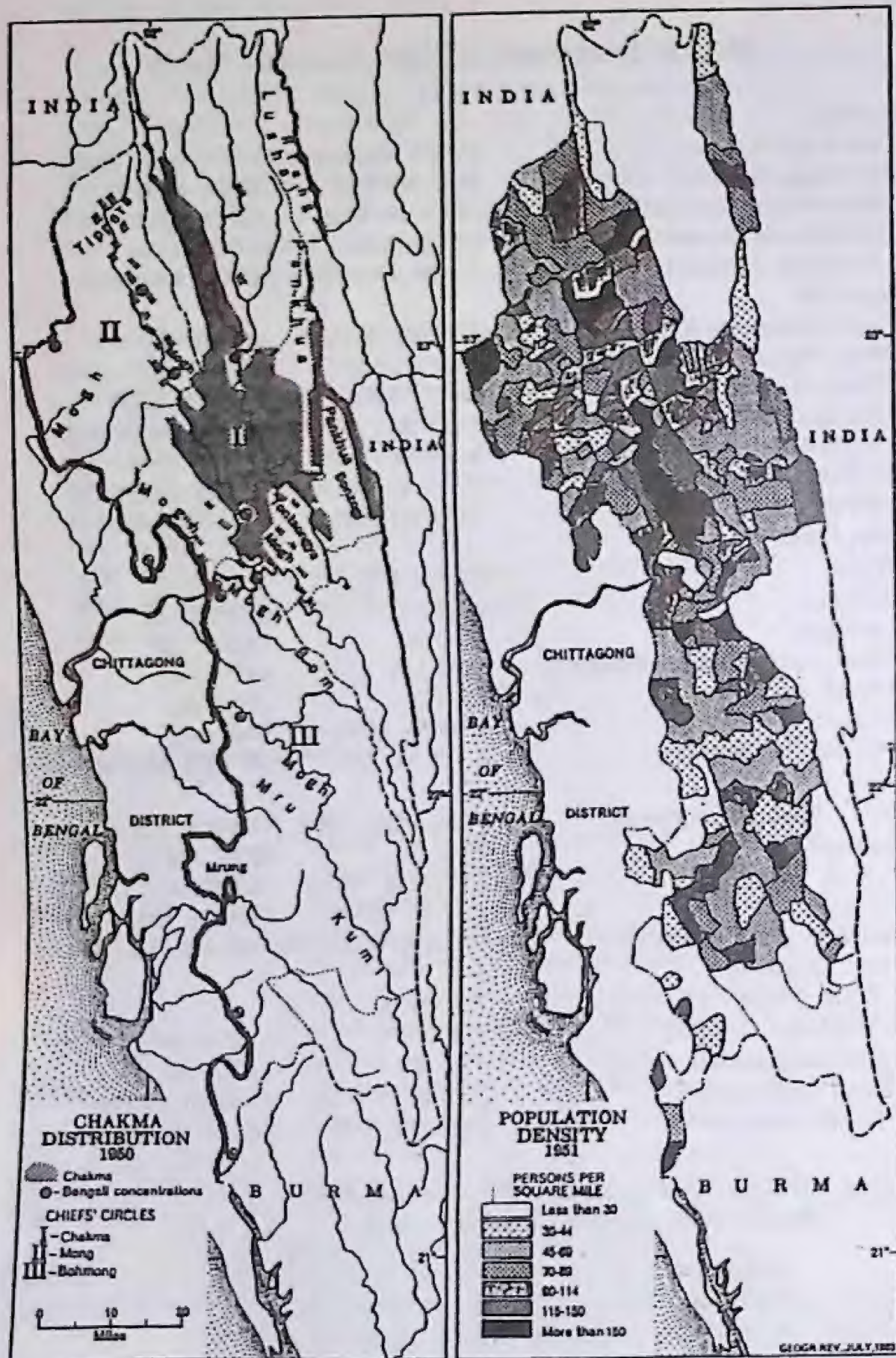
i. Type	Earth fill
ii. Length	2200 ft. (670.6 m)
iii. Height	150 ft. (45.7 m)
iv. Max. width at foundation	1500 ft. (457 m)
v. Crest width	25 ft. (7.6 m)
vi. Crest level	118 ft. MSL (36 m)
vii. Total excavation	4.05 M. Cft. (0.115 M.Cu.m)

#### Spillway

i. Max. Flood discharge	5,62,000 CFS (16000 cu.m.s.)
ii. Length	745 ft. (227 m)
iii. Crest Level	71.25 ft. MSL (21.9 m)
iv. Bridge Level	131 ft. MSL (33.94 m)
v. Size of gate(Tainter)	40 ft.x37.75 Ft (12.2mx11.5m)
vi. No. of gates	16
vii. Gate Hoist	75 Tons
viii. Tailrace length	4000 Ft. (1219 m)
ix. Tailrace width	400 Ft. (122 m)
x. Total excavation	205.8 M. Cft. (5.8 m.cu.m)
xi. Total concrete	3.76 M. Cft. (0.11 m.cu.m)

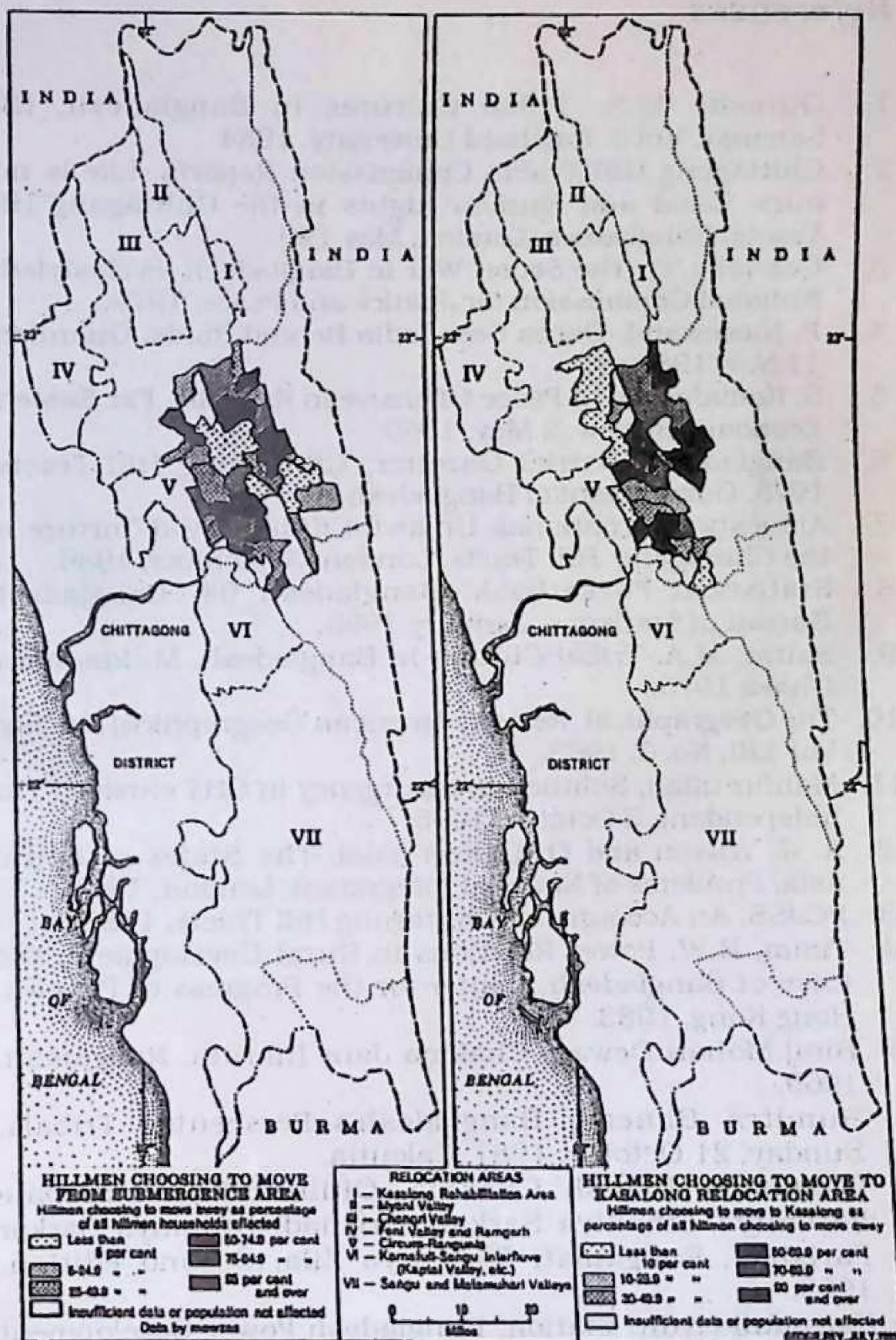
Source : Karnafull Hydro Station. Bangladesh  
Power Development Board, 1985





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